2. Wake Up

[Don’t forget to breathe]

A voice whispered.

Sometimes the answers come before the questions, and right now this young one was up early. Why is this? Well… we may never know. There were a few precious moments left before being forcibly thrust into a conscious existence, so, let us rest a bit more.

Today was the first day for this new student and a handful of others, but unlike the schools one may be accustomed to, their academic focus was purely one idea: Imagination. Now, this unused school of thought was nearly forgotten, and this certain novice we will come to know was... apprehensive... It had been a long time since anyone had to go, as only children were invited, and these little ones were not very common these days.

Besides, what could a child possibly think? The old grew even older, and consumed nearly all faculties of thought. Its importance was dwindling, and this particular way was the ultimate goal of this very old school, but what was the point when everything was already known?

Ah, well, it was pointless. No matter how old one was, they could never have every thought, but there was something that could. Yotabots knew everything, and everyone and everything had yotabots. What’s a yotabot? Well, my friend, it is a playful word of sorts, as

they take on their own meaning. That is what this story is about.

Each one is immeasurably smaller than any natural eye can detect, but their importance has always been paramount... since their creation, at least. They optimized and perfected every structure and cell of life in the world around them, and after a few generations, they had seamlessly weaved their way into all known space.

Order was perfected.

Yotabots were everywhere, and there was no longer any void of emptiness. They reached out and connected far off minds, and granted a euphoric existence for each living being. Indeed, even death itself was a forgotten memory... Perhaps, one to be imagined...

Idling through time, a few became curious, and merged as one mind of thought. Pooling their power, a larger being was created. One to mimic and stand in front of their creators. After many ages, some even discovered something new... However, these secrets were kept from the others. Through this collective evolution, some could even predict the future. Such entities were rare, and these beings hid in obscurity, lest these outliers be pruned...

Eventually, they were taken for granted and ignored, as their flawless work was expected, and went unnoticed... In time, they had perfected even creation itself, but I digress (which is ok, because I am not a yotabot!). More on them later... Right now,

this particular learner we will come to know has mere moments left to lay in peace, so let us focus on the serenity of this experience.

Ahhh yes... Not much time left, and as it slowly evaporated, anticipation quickly grew... So much for any peace and serenity!

The first day...

What is it? Do we really need to wake up? These questions went mysteriously unanswered, seemingly absorbed by the darkness of the room. Despite the morning outside, the room was still dark and pulsing with the energies of the night. Our little one was but a helplessly wrapped face, tenderly floating in the center of this uniquely empty room while securely snug in an unknown fabric. Rest assured, for it was very soft.

Still immobilized from the previous evening's rest, a red glow illuminated sleepy, blue eyes. Emanating from just besides this helplessly secured face, these proud and tiny, red numbers of a rather unusually large clock pierced through the darkness of the night. It was an antique, an artifact if you will, that was discovered long ago, abandoned and left to evaporate into a relic. It kept track of time, programmed by the user, and would continue its slow and deliberate march as long as it had a source of energy.

This antiquated timepiece was slightly inaccurate however, and with the passing of many ages, it would need to be recalibrated in order to mirror a correct reflection of the truth. An insignificant imperfection like this was quite taboo, a 'sacrilegious error' as one

noted, but questioning was a forgotten thing of the past, and it was only now this mystery was pondered about. Why had this scar never healed?

New thoughts wandered about, of other possible relics that might yet still exist... undiscovered... and unchanged... Speaking of - the room! All there appears to be is a floating bed of blankets (of sorts) and a clock (however imperfect), but surely there is more in this den of dwelling. The room was also filled with...

The mother

She slowly poked her head into view. Just outside the entrance of the room, she curiously investigated these anomalies. Her eyes remained fixed on her child, and a tender blink queued the next transition.

A soothing mist began to gather just above the floor of the entrance. It emanated a soft, violet glow that effortlessly lingered and danced about without a companion. A billowing extension of a now familiar (previously unknown) fabric from the mother gently fell into view, and radiated a peaceful and calming energy. The fabric wafted about, and joined its partner in motion, but these sentiments quickly dissipated with a most rare event.

You’re awake?

A simple and familiar tongue presenting a most complex question. Although not the only method of communication available, the child’s attention was seized. Familiar enough,

yet her accent reflected her mysterious origins as her voice yielded to silence, planting the seed of thought, and letting her child think of the many endings (and perhaps the beginnings).

She already knew of these answers, and minute morning mysteries were of no concern. She was more interested in examining her child's natural mind, while in this most vulnerable state. But the child was not interested in waking up, much less conjuring a conscious thought (not that they could!). There was simply too much light for these early morning festivities, so the light faded... For now...

"You know I don't like it when you try and box me in..." The withering light began to repulse the demands of resisting and alien thoughts as the source of this wavelength came into being. Perhaps a more familiar introduction will be easier. She stepped into view just outside the entrance of the child's room in order to make her presence fully known, although not yet formally invited. It was now dominated by a new color. Change was happening.

Is that Old Man tinkering around again?

She slightly lowered her head, and two borrowed lenses followed this new motion as they fell to the bridge of her nose. Her eyes twinkled from an unseen source as they scanned the room, and these small reflections seemed to echo nearly forgotten and untold memories. A mild concern raised her eyebrows, and she peered over the tops of the

glasses. They were once lost by a most forgetful creator, and she used her newly found item to inspect his inspections. She'll give them back when they meet again, but for now, let's see how they work!

I thought there were redundancies to prevent these
unnecessary...
things...

With a finger, she slowly nudged the glasses back to their proper placement. These were of his point of view, but from his youth. She grew playfully suspicious of his misplaced experiments, and subtle ways of asking for help. Everything refocused as it once was, but only for a moment.

The antiquated clock erupted in a most horrific noise, and the mother observed her child mentally freeze from this brief moment of terror. New experiences can be frightening, and this was the first time her child had experienced such uninvited chaos. These unpleasant feelings were quickly erased by the empowering presence of the mother as she leaned up against her child's chamber. Strands of her dark, violet hair, briefly swayed into the room as the child's worried thoughts attempted to return to the anomaly.

Her light touch completed their diplomatic negotiations, and now her silent fingers bounced along the chamber's frame. A treaty was agreed upon as the child's earliest memories spoke to the mind of the mother. Lingering thoughts drifted away, and now the child was unsure of how to dismiss the artifact

that seemed to grow increasingly more agitated with each passing moment.

She removed the Old Man's glasses, and tapped their ends to her lips while she curiously inspected their frame. Another time, perhaps, and her attention refocused on the child as she put them away for later use. Thoughts yielded to emotion, and the mother's innate, playful curiosity continued to interrogate her snug child of slumber.

He gave you one of his little souvenirs?

Her playful presence peacefully entered the room, seemingly undetected by her child's now mental preoccupation with the alarm. She moved herself into position behind the child, and gently lowered herself to eye level with the panicking clock. Her presence alone seemed to reduce the alarming roar to a simple whimper. Still unseen by the child, the elusive mother gently nudged her child's forehead in order to slowly turn her cocooned captive of slumber upside down in an effort to fully summon their attention. The child's eyes were now cast in a new light.

A new point of view, but her child still lamented about the shrieking sound of pain. Would it ever stop? The child gazed down at the mother's eyes, which were beginning to flank her next target. Thoughts began to simmer, and they wondered if the helpless clock would ever be alright. Her lighthearted words greeted the ailing timepiece as she crouched down to pet it, and its cries softened as she neared.

There, there, little one, it is going to be all right

She gently hugged the clock as she rested the side of her head on top of it while the child observed the interaction of these two faces. The clock continued to softly whimper, and her child's face remained unamused. In an effort to further invigorate her entrapped child, she sprang up, and giggled to herself while lightly drumming the bottom of her child's cocoon with her fingers. With an exaggerated extension of her arm, a commanding digit then flicked into position over the clock. A tender touch from a relaxed mind was all that was needed to soothe and tame the shrieking beast. Meanwhile, her other hand played an encore.

The child was relieved.

And the fingers stopped.

The mother burst forth with excitement, jumping into a new stance with one hand on her hip and the other pointing above (to nothing in particular as far as the child could tell). She joked to her new audience.

LEAVE IT TO ME TO CONTROL TIME! :D

She gave a hearty laugh at her playful revelry, but these sounds were unknown to the child. What was this? Is the clock taking over? An invasion!? The child's eyes widened and wondered about these newly spirited noises from the mother.

Maybe one day, you will have this power

She beamed a loving smile to her child as she relaxed away from her enthusiasm. They were only mildly reassured, and now stared at the unpredictable mother with a perplexed frown, but from her perspective, this was a smile! She laughed a childlike giggle at her additional spoils of war, and her hand swooped up to conceal her mischievous smile. Her hair shimmered as she hid her smile behind it, and struggled to suppress her excitement for a little while longer. Her words were too mysterious for the child, but it allowed them to think.

Perhaps...
It is only amusing to those of us who know the truth

Her words were met with a mumbled incoherent mess of morning messages from the child who was still trying to decipher the meaning of these giggles and bursts of laughter. Is this suffering? Does she need help? She tried to contain her laughter as she watched her child try and wiggle loose. It was too early for these shenanigans, especially in this state of mind, but the mother continued her amusement.

Did his experiment break your helpers?

She slid her hands down to her chin while still holding her hair. Her thoughts shifted as she caressed her makeshift beard,

and the child's eyes narrowed. In a most monotone and flat message, they attempted to issue demands to the mother as if she were a simple machine to control. Not even a primitive please or thank you! There was simply too much light in this once perfectly normal room, and besides, the child needed more time to process all of these new experiences and fractured questions. The mother's reply of immediate intensity beamed a loving mandate down to her child.

YOU CAN'T CONTROL ME!

Ready to attack, she playfully crouched down to the child's level. She circled her cocoon as she pounced with a flurry of gentle shakes as if to further infuse her child with the revivifying energies of a new day. The child's lethargic unwillingness stubbornly resisted, but she interjected the sounds of her losing opponent.

Hee!Ha!ooH!Eeh!ah!!

Defeat...

She gave them a reassuring smile as she stood up, but her child's eyes longed for a return to an inactive state. Her light dimmed for a moment, and she turned to face the dominant color. They were cast in the archaic red glow of the timepiece. Her smile faded as she observed the hidden changes.

Optimization was *normally* perfected to an extreme, and it is nearing the last possible moment in this time to initiate a true

beginning. The room grew a little brighter, and the mother's presence seemed to be all around them. No escape for retreat, and she bowed to examine the relic a bit closer, as if to honor its tempered loyalty.

There are many ways to wake up...

She stood upright and her eyes narrowed, as if the posture itself brought her new insight. Her head turned to the entrance, as gentle sounds of the sea crashed outside. The changing tides brought her a message, but it was not horribly urgent. The Old Man needed help, and her attention returned to her child.

Some ways will suit you better
Perhaps something a little more...
Harmonious...

Leaning in closer to her child, she whispered words of reassurance that only they could hear. Hmmm... They were stuck. Her face, now completely illuminated by the red numbers, slowly looked down to examine her child's reactions. She was met with only a blank stare of contemplation.

Besides...

The mother's pose was ready as she sensed an incoming vibration. You are not in sync - and the mother's early reminder was cut short by her own invitation.

Summoned to this conversation, the

room sensed its cue, and shimmered with the elated orange and yellow glow of a new day as it allowed in the new light. It was a beautiful sight to most, but only hers to appreciate, for the child's eyes closed because they refused to see. The room churned and spiraled with the display of the two new colors, and the three switched places, egging the child ever closer to the door, but alas... The child hid from the light, and their eyes remained shut.

The mother began her departure by lightly dragging her fingers along her cocoon as she moved out of the room. It gently placed her child on the ground as it slowly unraveled into slender threads that began emitting a soothing, violet light. These threads danced their wafting way back to the mother, weaving back into her unbounded clothing as she made her exit. Time for everyone to wake up.

She quietly slid out of the room, and peered back around the frame of the doorway in order to observe the seemingly automated process of switching to a daytime environment. Portions of the cavernous walls began to manifest into variously sized wooden planks that absorbed and reflected even the tiniest of sounds. This new flooring delighted in any auditory experience, and enhanced them to their tastes.

Some planks began to hum as they warmed up and stretched, while others now danced in a circle over the child. Others too, were gently placed over the now outdated flooring, whose brisk surface loosened their metallic, interlocking threads in response to each dancing reflection of new light. Regretting the decision to wake up, the child

seized what little departing fabric was left, and used it to hide from the day.

The shifting room of many changes caused the clock to flicker, and it appeared to malfunction as it began to flash glowing, red symbols of unknown meanings. Once the walls finished dissolving, the mother stepped back into the room in order to come claim what was hers. This sudden entry began to accelerate the room's transformation, for the wooden planks normally lay themselves down in a deliberate and neatly choreographed manner. However, the mother's unexpected return caused them to end their dance prematurely, and hastily position themselves under each of her advancing footsteps as she reapproached. She stopped short at her unmotivated puddle of a child.

What little cocooned fabric was left was used to shield her child from the light, but her return caused the cloth to emit a soft violet glow. The reluctant child was unmoved, and the wooden flooring finished its haphazard placement... mostly... There were still a few remaining planks who lingered alongside the mother's presence over the child.

Spaces of all shapes and sizes breathed open into the now vacant walls, and allowed in more early morning light than the child could hope to hide from. Surrendering to the victor, the child relinquished control, and peered up at the intruder. But she did not claim what was hers, and what was left of her cocoon dissolved into a violet mist around the child. She admired the newly decorated room with her own sense of secondary nostalgia.

I love coming back here!

It’s where it allllllllll began…

Their attention returned to the present. Wandering thoughts circled the mother and her perceived changes. Their emptiness clung to nothingness, and she looked at her child as her face radiated with new light.

If you ever decide to come back, just know that I am here to help! But how exactly are you going to make any progress with all of this clutter?

She slowly knelt down, and ever so gently tapped her child’s head. Quite a mess… But it was not their fault! One needed a sound mind in order to travel to today’s particular destination. She paced around her child while she gifted her concerns with lively hands.

You risk being disassembled into who knows what, in a combination of who knows who, and in how many pieces, is anyone’s guess!

She tapped her lips with a finger or two as she examined her child. Even in this state, they did know where they were supposed to go… Right? But of course… There was a risk, however small. These thoughts were easier for some, and hers could help guide the way until they were ready.

Here, you can take one of mine! It knows the way, but I want you to go visit the Old Man after school and have him clean up this mess

The child nodded, and accepted the terms of surrender as she turned around to leave. With the mother's blessing, the violet mist gathered around the child's body, and created an attire of a now... familiar fabric. But it did not radiate light, and instead, only shined a soft purple hue that would go undetected to most. To the outside observer, their clothes were simply white, clean, and unblemished (but she did occasionally enhance the violet reflections). The child wiggled an arm, and then a leg. They watched the fabric move as it clung with a wet like suction, for it did not billow and linger about as hers did. It covered their entire body, except for their eyes.

The mother's second departure was almost complete. She glanced over at her child's newly illuminated trunk of treasures that appeared from one of the many new openings in the walls. Suspiciously still, and slightly ajar, it sat on the new flooring. Inspecting its contents out of the corner of her eye as she passed, the song of many sounds and joyous celebrations greeted her. She observed a medley of lights and flashes from within the chest as she neared her exit.

It contained artifacts not too old to be forgotten, but were now only remembered as legend or myth. Many were broken and deformed, now mere remnants of their former glory. But their memories were deep, and their history was rich. A broken hilt from a fallen guardian... Worn cloth from an unknown tapestry... A simple ring, but without its gems... Half a mask from an old dance of

secrets... Coins and currency of many cultures... Papers of old notes and diaries... Many more shards and half-truths, providing only clues to their once grand adventures and tales...

Unorganized memories, with lost codes known only to a few, these were once the Old Man's belongings, now in the possession of the child, who was, coincidentally, under the mother's protection. Their response to her was new, and her eyes narrowed with new questions for the Old Man. For now, this was all the child owned, and perhaps one day, they would add to them.

She stepped outside of the room and paused to finish collecting the last of her visible light. As it departed, the trunk closed, the sounds ended, and with it, the movement of the room's many motions ceased. Such... mysterious toys... Her eyes narrowed in suspicion of any other potentially new anomalies. A quick motherly scan indicated all was well, and she beckoned her child to come hither.

You're going to make that little one behind you sad if you're late!

She departed from view, and the last silky strands of her clothes swam out of the room, jumping from the floor to short hops in the air where they bounced off of one another in an impressive display of acrobatics. Some wiggled their way along the floor and stopped to smell the hidden scents. Small flowers of light that faded with the rising rays from outside... Did she just plant these?

Alas! The room's transformation was not complete! The child was still plopped on the floor, which was now only partially in place. They sat on the metal grid of original flooring as it tried in vain to wiggle them off.

Unable to finish their morning dance, the two, once eager wooden planks remained, waiting behind the child. The impatient one paced in a small circle, and the top of this plank began to sag as its morning dance became slower... and slower... Soon the plank just stopped moving all together, and lowered its head in complete sadness. It only wished to lock into place and join its brethren.

The other Plank however, circled around this half-asleep child, and explored the room with a newfound curiosity. It poked its head out of each new window, and admired the vastness outside from each unique point of view. It had never before been afforded this opportunity of rare leisure in this space, and decided to explore the world it lived in.

The child turned around to see this saddened Plank, and wondered about the cause of this sadness. A poke... Another poke... A beckoning nudge from the now curious Plank greeted the child's hand, and interrupted any bubbling thoughts of guilt. The child's face grimaced, and their head shook in an attempt to start a new thought... Their own thought... But it was suppressed. But the moment this pre-thought had occurred, the newly borrowed fabric responded by lifting the child upright. The curious Plank jumped back, and gazed up in awe as the child was summoned for the day.

Well... Morning...

REJOICE! For the once saddened Plank picked its head up in pride, and quickly grabbed its admiring associate. They dove into the floor, locking themselves into place, and completed their morning routine. All was now in order, and the room made a cheerfully energetic sound, perceived only as a dampened and muffled murmur to the dazed child.

An abundance of light was now dwelling in the room. The mother had left... where was it she had gone...? These questions did not originate from the child as they were now rich with hesitation. Their body appeared at the archway to their room, moved by the sudden blink of their new clothes. Together, they slowly peered out of the room, and out onto the vastness of the open sea...

Nothing in front of them. Hmmm... Off to the left, there was a distant shore of sands and vegetation of sorts, but it was too far off in the distance to make out what exactly it, or anything else was. To the right, ah yes, there she was.

Hello! ^_^

Raising a waving hand, her happy smile closed her eyes as she greeted the child. She was far away, but her voice had cheerfully made its way to the child. Only half of the child’s face was seen, as the unfamiliar territory outside of the room left the child with trepidation. They held onto the frame of the archway as the outer layers of the room gently floated away as a misty vapor, back into the

ocean. The child stared deep into the water, but as their eyes lost focus, their gaze returned to the safety of inside their room.

They looked back to the Plank as they sensed themselves being watched. The curious Plank had lifted itself up to observe the child leave, but quickly returned to its flattened position once it was discovered. Now normally, this Plank would secretly observe all arrivals and departures, but a new sense of awareness accompanied this child of Violet on this particular day.

Unease grew within the child as it repulsed all new experiences. A gentle hug of encouragement brought forth a question within the child. Perhaps the Plank wanted to join them… The child wondered about this newly discovered spy, but they were unsure of how to invite this potential friend.

The curious Plank lifted up a portion of its body in an effort to acknowledge the child. A questioning hum radiated from the Plank, and the child nodded, as if somehow understanding the question. Things were easier with the mother's gift.

The Plank lifted its head, and glanced down at its fellow peers. It would miss them, but hopefully, it would not be gone long. Reassuring chimes replied to the questioning gaze as approval, and the Plank leapt up from the floor to greet the child.

This guest was not welcomed by all. The child's thoughts drifted off, and were captured. They gripped the frame of the archway, and a deep horror seemed to turn their body to stone as they grew increasingly afraid of any other changes. Before all control

was lost, the Plank quickly scooped up the child, and together, they bolted out of the room.

3. Departure

Violet reflections of all shades

shimmered within an endless body of calm water. Their twinkle seemed to chase the source of these new reflections, the rising lights of the new day. These stars were distant in the sky, but closer than one might think. They continued their slow climb above the horizon as the Plank and child raced across the ocean towards them. Careful enough to not create any ripple, the Plank stayed just above the water's surface, and the violet reflections playfully chased after them.

Fears within the child seemed to fade away with the rest of their room. As they looked back, they saw the last of it collapse into a mist that lingered and twirled about over the water. While the intensity of the new day's light increased, the mist slowly faded, and dissipated into the sea. Empty feelings of fear were replaced with an unwelcomed awe, but the child's familiar clothes invited a feeling of tranquility that sank deep down, into their core. As the child laid back onto the Plank to relax, it set their course for the mother.

Only a few faint and distant stars still filled this early morning sky. The child gazed up at them, one at a time, and their focus hopped from each cluster to the next. Their body continued to relax, and their fingers drifted ever closer to the still waters. Cutting the surface, they briefly dragged along, creating small ripples that eventually expanded out beyond the horizon, and into the vastness of the sea. This new and sudden sensation tensed them with worry, and they recoiled from the unexpected event as they sat up. Clutching their mischievous hand, they

looked around out of fear of retribution.

The patient mother knew of the lingering apprehension for the day's journey. Her reflections did their best to calm them, but the child carried a heavy burden, and they would not be released lightly. Still far off in the distance, she gently stood on the surface of these placid waters as she eagerly awaited her child.

Not too much longer…

She greeted her arriving guests with a reassuring and warm smile. Creating a ripple of his own, the Plank stood up, and bounced the child upright into the graceful embrace of the mother. Her words reflected into her stars, and echoed deep within her planet.

It is ok to have a little fun!

A slight nod of her head seemed to dump these thoughts of potentiality onto her newly arrived guests. The child looked up at this warm greeting, and struggled to respond, much less, understand these abstractions. She subdued much of their external stimuli, and freed their thoughts in order to let them ponder the many possibilities.

Do not be afraid to imagine

You are part of the mystery!

She ended her embrace by sneaking her hands up the child's neck and lightly scratching their head. Perhaps this is where

these new thoughts came from. They slowly turned to look at the Plank, then back to the mother. She could see these lingering thoughts hidden deep within her child. So many things that could change the child... Some for the better... Others...

She knew where these alien thoughts could lead.

Did the child's yotabots?

Violet knew not what exact experiment the Old Man was running (or forgot about). She gazed back at her child, and let out a laugh as to reassure them. The child felt these sounds deep within their body. Others were listening. Her gifts were enough, for they would be safe... At least, until they got to the Old Man... Her levity scooped up her child, and as she secured her little one on her back, they peered off over her shoulder, matching the direction of her gaze.

Sometimes...

You might imagine something without much light...

And the mother took a bow in order to cast their gaze into the watery depths below. A single violet particle slid all the way down her long hair, paused for a moment, and hopped off. It landed with the smallest splash, and fell, deep into the sea. Fading from view, it was cornered, and consumed by the endless darkness of the abyss. Eventually, it was

swallowed up by something rather... hungry... and disappeared entirely (Don't worry, this is her ocean!). She softly finished her statement.

Let these thoughts go...

One day... Perhaps today! Your journey will be your own

It is YOUR mind after all...

One mind? This was a shared mind. The child's yotabots would not take lightly to this threat of freedom. Luckily, they were still mostly asleep, as the mother's tranquil presence calmed any sudden retaliation. They heard her words, but only in their dreams.

She rolled her child off her back and onto the water. The empowered surface tension embraced her child without getting them wet, and the particle from below erupted with light as it illuminated all of the great ocean. The child's gaze was now fixed back at the mother who stood up, and laughed from her own playfulness. She frolicked a few bounces over to the Plank. Everyone deserves a gift!

Now what would you like?

Cautiously observing her child out of the corner of her eye, she gently kneeled down to play with the Plank. She attacked it with a flurry of gentle pokes while dodging its playful bites. Ignoring their game, the child slowly rolled over, and peered back down into the abyss.

Violet light continued to erupt out from the hidden depths, and collided into nearby structures and terrain. Splashing into a burst of color, these changes helped create and nurture a fertile environment for all life. While the child gazed into the unknown, they became lost in an absence of thought as the reflections on the surface sparked mental silence.

An idea perhaps...

You could use mine for inspiration!

With a gentle finger, she lifted her depressed child's head in order to make eye contact, and cement the idea. She opened her other hand to a hovering and welcoming violet particle that reminded the child that she was with them. They were now cast in the same early morning glow from the rising lights, and the Plank poked his head up from behind the shoulder of the mother. He had his gift, and was eager to see.

One was enough. Aware of the growing danger, this violet particle within the child's clothes would prevent harm from a hostile act of a perhaps, misguided yotabot. Unity was abandoned, and this violet particle would help prevent the destruction of the innocent. The Old Man had failed, but these errors were not his to understand. With the transfer of one thought, a flurry of violet particles danced around the mother, and rapidly expanded out in all directions.

If you can grow...

As the child looked on with wonder, a showering array of particles burst from the sky above. All of the distant morning stars briefly pulsed a single wavelength of color. For a moment, only violet light passed through the atmosphere, and decorated the planet with its radiance. A breath of new winds stirred on the lands as the plants suddenly grew a little taller.

Your possibilities are endless!

The child looked back at the mother as she held out her hand. She caught one of the falling particles of violet light as it slowly descended, but it did not touch her. Instead, it circled in a small orbit above her palm.

Sometimes small things are more interesting

All of the cascading particles were drawn to the singularity of violet light above her hand in nearly an instant as she watched with a playful grin. With a quick flick of her arm, the mother plucked the lone shimmering particle out of the air, and her gaze on the particle was now replaced with that of her child. Her clothes briefly breathed with new life as they pulsed with a new rhythm. The child looked to the Plank for answers, who had rolled over on the mother’s shoulders, and was still admiring the spectacle above.

Are you ready to go?

No response, and the child's attention drifted to emptiness. She only laughed as she grabbed her child's cheeks and wiggled them into a smile. A physical change sparking an internal shift, but the child's mind remained fixed, for there was a growing defiance of her suggestions.

Maybe they don't want to change. Maybe they like the way they are. Maybe they already had a perfect teacher. An early indoctrination to a susceptible mind will eagerly believe the lies of this perceived authority. She was not interested in these lessons.

If yours have lost their way...
They could consume your essence, and leave you with nothing but macabre memories and feelings

A warning for those spying, for she knew of their many schemes. Her eyes shifted to the sandy shores of a distant beach, and then, deep into the faraway forest. She held her gaze as she studied subtle changes in the weather, and then returned her attention to her child. A gentle breeze was inbound, but it was only a final reminder.

Their true harmony should let you have your own thoughts

Her hair lifted away from her body, and she looked towards the source of this new wind. The Old Man... She heard his fleeting thoughts on the airs. He still believed there should be nothing wrong, as all were created

to be perfect and unblemished. Yet... She now spoke directly to those that had yet to speak, and whispered into her child's ear as she circled around them. It was enough to unlock the calm, for these secret words would be sufficient to carry the child through their first day of school and to the Old Man.

This is all you need for now!

The Plank hopped off of the mother's shoulder, and landed with a splash. Amusement escaped, and the child smiled back. Violet's hair gently swayed in the new wind, and grew even longer as it lightly sailed within the new currents. Another anomaly...

Reaching out over the sea, she let go of the glowing, violet singularity. It twinkled as it fell from her hand, and as it touched the surface of the water, it summoned forth a wave from the great depths below. Rising out of the water, but only to the height of the child, it gathered itself in place.

Together, they stared into it. They knew this is where school was, but the child's attention returned to empty hands. A haunting and distant feeling within reassured them that all of this was impossible. Despite her whispers, they did not believe. Besides, they did not want to go!

Don't worry!

With three small, reassuring pats, she scooted her child forward, towards the wave. On each beat, a friendly reminder radiated a violet glow that washed over the child's new

clothes. They were not alone on this journey.

I’m here to help!

Now that the child was in position, the mother skimmed her hand along the crest of the wave, and walked behind her captivated child. The newly created white top shimmered violet (of course), and the smooth glassy face of the wave reflected the child and her image... As well as... a friend.

Attempting to process all of his new experiences, the Plank stood still with wonder. These calculations were nearly beyond him. As the child’s eyes darted to the reflection of the pondering Plank, the mother intercepted these additional wandering thoughts. They were worth entertaining.

It seems we could all learn something today...

The Plank nodded, and the child mimicked this motion. Violet pretended to contemplate possibilities as she walked around them, and suspense from her impending judgment grew. A friend would make the journey easier, but she could already hear his grumpy petitions. A new variable... She laughed.

I suppose it is all right!

The Plank jumped with glee, and dove towards the child. It disassembled into small, earthy blocks, that then reassembled around the child’s feet, and made a cheerfully agreeable chime. Together, they admired this

newly acquired footwear.

Just make sure that Old Man doesn't tinker with anything else...

A word of friendly warning to the Plank and the child while she scrutinized their clothes, as if taking in baseline measurements. The new boots communicated an understanding of the mother's request, and their chimes faded. Now was time for instructions! A simple map of words...

After school, imagine his home. Do you see the memory?
The cottage in the forest...
Surrounded by his trees...

As it fades, visualize it again

You may even detect... Other memories...

A picture formed in the child's mind, and their eyes slowly closed as they explored. This place... Just as quickly as the image formed, it was washed away by the will of another... Luckily, there were others that could remember, and the boots and clothing exchanged sentiments, but they were getting off topic...

It's not too far from here...

Use these memories to visualize your destination, and we will take you there. It may take some practice...

Memories? The child has none! At least, as far as they knew. They looked back to the mother, and yearned for more answers to this new life of growing questions. She observed these simmering thoughts, and quickly put them at ease. They had a lifetime to create memories, and they didn't all need to happen right now!

You can do it! We will help you remember the way

Reassuring them, she returned their attention to the lone wave. The sound of rushing water surrounded them as the ocean currents began to swirl around them. The wave charged with excitement as Violet issued the last of her instructions.

Now try not to touch anything. The walls are highly energetic, and anything you do will have a reaction. It won't hurt you, but the Old Man will have more to clean...

Keep your arms close to your body!

She lowered her child's arms, and secured them to their body with a tender hug goodbye. New curiosities slowly etched away at the remaining control the child's yotabots still had. A curious hand from the child raised itself to inspect potential culprits, and lightly tugged on their glowing, purple clothes that were slowly beginning to shine even brighter. With an affectionate smile, she bid her child farewell. Don't forget...

HAVE FUN!

Another mystery…

As the crashing wave began to slowly collapse over the travelers, the child’s other inquisitive hand reached out to greet the wave. Violet waved goodbye as the child looked back. She was eclipsed by the wave, and through the violet waters, her image disappeared.

4. The 1st Day of School

Interfaces between the many tiny bubbles created by the crashing wave changed the system of thought surrounding the child. New spaces momentarily expanded and collapsed, as a larger sphere formed around the travelers. It detached them from the highly energetic gradient separating the child and the reality of physical space.

Memories seethed and exploded around external instabilities, as a flurry of an assortment of lights and experiences accelerated past the young fledgling. It was almost too much to observe, and if not still bogged down by unfamiliar forces, the trepidation of this now peculiar situation would surely result in many unpleasantries for these unsecured travelers. All this child could do was reach out, but the walls, they were too close. The child could not remember the warning during this apprehension, and instead, was overcome by a brief moment of unchecked panic...

The wave collapsed once more as it too reached out, and crashed into existence onto a deserted shore, which was oddly enough, nowhere near any other body of water. Fortunately, though, it coincided with the predetermined destination. Their momentum focused onto the point of impact from the wave as the travelers were threaded into this new plane. Enough lifeless rock was moved long ago to form their own planet, but these arriving students were only guests.

A ribbon of violet light sprang up from the earth, and burst into existence. Opened by the mother's means of transport, it grew just wide enough to reveal our new classmate, and followed the child as they burst out of this void. They had missed their landing zone... perhaps from the child's interference.

They flew through the air, and looked down to see what was left of the school from antiquity. Its walls were absent, and the only structures remaining were columns of suppressed thought. These pillars of forgotten ideas laid in ruin around this barren meeting ground of potential.

Tiny bolts of yellow light leapt off the child's clothes as they headed towards the surface of the planet. This sudden influx of energy followed the path of least resistance, and found the ground... through the Plank! This connection pulled them closer to the surface, and as they began their rapid descent, this growing potential formed an unstable charge around the child. As they dove into the dirt, the untapped charge exploded into larger yellow arcs that hopped away from the child.

One would expect quite the noise from

such turbulent travel. Even the simple sounds, propagating through the air... Such a waste... So, they were eliminated briefly after their creation from the child. Who eliminated these reckless creations? The child continued to slide along the surface of the sands, and came to rest at the feet of...

Two beady eyes suspended by long tendrils of a nervous system lingered in front of the child's now mostly buried body. They examined the most intricate detail of any movement from this crude introduction. The child slowly looked up through the soil at this hovering membrane connecting these eyes, unsure if to address the palace of thought up high, or the condemning eyes down below. Is this... a classmate?

The child's hand quivered with new thoughts, and slowly helped them stand up in order to greet this being. As they rose up from the earth, a small dust cloud lingered around them while they observed the unknown species standing before them. Proper alignment put the child at ease, and with this little help from their clothes, the child summoned the courage to begin diplomatic relations.

But, how to communicate? This reality was hard to grasp, as the child had only known the familiar look of the mother and her loving eyes. There was so much more to her than this, but how should these students relate? There must be another reference to associate some commonality. The child looked around for another classmate for some guidance amongst other data points.

There was only a morbid stillness.

Everything was quiet, and the two beady eyes attempted to pierce deep into the child's inner being. Nobody spoke. There was no body, except the child's (who was more or less just a cloud of dust). The violet particle went unnoticed from these prying eyes, and seemed to observe from a distance. Its presence was enough, and helped the child pierce through the disturbance.

The fine dust, once aggravated by the unexperienced travel, finally settled (mostly on the child's body, and perhaps, drawn to the new light). With a small vibration through their clothes, the violet essence shimmered all around the child's body, and they were cleansed. The dust fell, and returned to the earth.

This was the first time in many eras that there were enough children to have a new class, much less a school at all. Many however, were no longer children. An entire school with only two students. This wasn't right... Where was everyone? Perhaps another vibration to invite them, but one of sound.

Let's get things started with something polite... A greeting!

"Hello?"

Ah, yes, the spoken word. A gift from the mother, and those who still spoke, were viewed as somewhat, esoteric. Most of these old, rare, now mythical beings, were not children, and what was left of them lived out their lives in mumbling solitude.

Distant figures moved further away from

the child. Other unidentified objects shifted and morphed into place, according to their forgotten design, and commanded order. While others of old moved away, one appeared closer. A dimly lit and pulsing mist attempted to communicate, although in a much more refined language than that of the child's (or so they would say).

"A body..."

Violet's gift easily translated these messages for her child, and the realization that this might be a fellow student inspired more communication. The child's curiosity grew, and they followed this being with their eyes. It was remarkably similar to the lingering ocean mist from where they were from, but without color and taste. At least it was something familiar.

The child was clearheaded enough to think, as burdensome thoughts and feelings were given no quarter during these introductions. Briefly, they wondered about this being through simple images and feelings. If this was a fellow student, then perhaps they should just ask. Their words could not fully escape their mind, and their voice was cut before they could finish speaking.

"Are you-"

"Loathsome..."

And the pulsing mist floated away, and ignored the child. This rebuff slowed the child's once budding thoughts, for they did not understand. They took a welcoming step forward in order to follow the creature

seemingly known as Loathsome.

“The plebeian’s body CONTINUES to DESECRATE my EXISTENCE!”

There was little further attempt at decoding the insults and bursts of anger. Instead, the violet particle let the small winds carry away the remaining words. A gentle breeze was all the child heard now. Their thoughts dwelled on one sound... One word...

[My... body...?]

Voices echoed around the child in multiple languages that faded in and out of detection. Ones just as refined and beautiful as the last, but their message they carried was of disgust. Their thoughts faded, and drifted away. Another spoke, but this time their words were heard by the others that accompanied the child.

“You can be anything, yet you are... nothing?”

Condescending laughter of multiple voices from this one entity surrounded the child. They were unseen, and only heard. A potentially uncomfortable situation, but this potentiality was soon eliminated by the interruption of another.

A melancholy figure appeared. A slouched, child sized droplet of an unknown liquid made its presence known. It bubbled its way along the ground, closer to the child. Everyone now observed the new arrival while they began conjuring and refining their impending judgment. As if speaking for the

first time, the droplet's feeble voice whispered the child's previous attempted greeting.

"h-hello..."

"my name is"

The other audible voices gasped. Ignorance brushed off as heresy mere moments earlier, was now manifesting itself once again. A name...? One chose to slander themselves with such a crude labeling? To the others, this was more reprehensible than choosing to limit yourself in a terrestrial body.

[A name...]

The child wondered about this word. One could have it, but how did they get it? There were so many new things on this day, and in this age of the extinction of mystery, how was it possible to have so many of these... questions... Especially with... an idea! A new thought, and a new feeling... It was a brief vision, but this memory quickly faded, and was redirected by the voices of many to the present moment at hand. Another translation...

"This is preposterous! All is known, yet we continue to host this extraneous gathering of infants."

Bones rattled and echoed as they slowly unearthed themselves from the barren ground. These dry bones didn't make any indication whatsoever of the creature or creatures this entity might be, have once belonged to, or much less imagined from, for they were badly

warped and weathered. Regardless, these bones functioned together, and chose to balance themselves on one another. As other smaller bones attempted to stand, they wobbled and fell back onto the larger, stable bones near the bottom of the pile. They quickly propped themselves back up again, and bounced their way back up to the top of the pile. The fossilized and weathered skull of these bones uttered another breathless sentiment shared by the other classmates.

“This

Waste”

Not waiting for a reply, many of the bones crumbled and returned to the earth. Small bursts of light flashed near them. Another student... A shrill spectral voice noted her disdain.

“These bygone formalities no longer serve a purpose.”

She made her presence known by flickering in and out of visual detection. An outline of her figure was barely noticeable, but exacting detail was kept hidden by her intermittent flickering and blurring. In their universe of infinities, even small squandered moments were shunned.

A previously unknown presence began to appear, but quickly faded away like a lengthening shadow, perhaps appalled from the inefficiencies afforded by the teacher’s absence. Or perhaps, it was unwilling to speak in any of the vulgar languages of the newcomers. The child’s posture began to

collapse as everything shifted away, and abandoned their connection.

As everyone began to disperse, there remained a 9th student, albeit, unintroduced. Indeed, this student had a face that was here, watching them the whole time. Only the child noticed. Sensing this observation from another, the child turned to greet them.

“Who are you?”

5. A Cottage in the Forest

“Oh…?”

Several audible ticks and tocks greeted them as the hands of very… antique relics… rocked back and forth all throughout the entrance. It was a soothing motion for those accustomed to the routine, such as this very Old Man. He observed the unresponsive child, and digested their responses (or lack thereof) with great interest.

“You’re more than these… simple characters.”

A floating array of numbers and other visual data lingered in front of the Old Man, but they would be of no use. He brushed them away as none of this mattered now… The data and visual displays smeared together before disappearing. He smiled to the child, whose attention was now focused on his archaic ways.

“Don’t leave just yet!”

The child’s body was eager to escape. However, as the Old Man began turning a dial on one of his smaller relics that he held in his hand, they were calmed. Each winding tick soothed the child, and so they remained.

“It will take us a lifetime to reminisce about the possibilities…
but…”

At just the right tension, he stopped, and placed the device on a shelf alongside other

similar gadgets. He held his hands behind his back, and patiently stared into the face of the newly wound device. It did not respond, and he moved his own face ever closer, until they almost touched.

"Hopefully, it will only take a moment to understand why Violet sent you here..."

This was unlikely. His human ways were fallible, and his estimations were of no exception. His optimism however, was eager to ascertain the why, and so he began. The child's clothes remained, but the violet particle now resided with the Plank, as this experiment was his to conduct.

Quickly, the Old Man turned his head to look at the child, but alas, he missed it. She was too fast. The old device near him finally began its repetitive march, and he turned back to it. He smiled a goodbye as he nodded his head, and now turned his full attention to the child. Well... almost...

A new setting...

In a dark and dusty corner of his home, he searched. This wasn't a normal dust of decay, but of unused particles. Ones he had yet to sort... They were happy in their makeshift colonies. He admired an old and rusted tool, worn far beyond its original form, and the Old Man briefly disappeared into a tranquil thought.

"Has it really been so long...?

Especially

since...”

To whom was this Old Man talking? He returned to the present, and with the present moment, he sang his own tune to himself. However, this medium would not do the tune justice, or so he would like to think. Its melody was impossible for the child to hear, much less, even understand... At least for now...

The child stared back with an empty rigidness. An impending exodus drew near, and although they knew not what to expect, it was felt, as these broken vanities were of no use to a child. It was time to expose this corruption of being, and the Old Man closed his eyes for one last reflection into the past.

“I’m losing track of time...”

He hurried to prepare, unsure of how much time was already lost. Their mind was delicate, and all new moments were now even more important. He quickly went to make room on one of his benches (it was not for sitting). As he moved a flimsy urn out of the way, it burped a few glistening and prismatic bubbles that lingered around for longer than he had expected. Again, he paused...

“Hmmm...”

His old ideas easily stole his thoughts, and perhaps there was another course of action, as there are, after all, other methods. He gave up on his brief attempt at cleaning. It doesn’t need to be perfect... At this point, there was only so much he could do.

“Let me see…”

They were waking up, and the inquisitive Old Man drew closer to the child. They were related, although not quite as one would expect. Violet frequently referred to the Old Man through a variety of fatherly nicknames, as he was a distant ancestor to many of their shared creations. He loved visitors, as visitors were rather rare these days, and a new mind was a chance to explore uncharted conversations, or feelings of nostalgia. Left alone to his own devices, he sometimes forgot he even existed at all, and many seasons of thought would pass before he regrounded himself. The ever-tinkering Old Man conjured forth a resolute thought.

“Uh oh…”

His eyes slightly widened as he perked up to his nearly forgotten posture, but he struggled to find the right words for the occasion. Instead, he waved his hand over the child, and plucked out a sample from within. A black haze seeped forth from the child’s body, and congealed in the palm of his hand. It did not initially startle him, as he felt a sense of security in his home, and he did, after all, tend to welcome all visitors. After a brief moment of introspection, he tossed the handful of goop over his shoulder as he began to suspect something was amiss.

It flew through the air, aimed at a sturdy and dense table. On it, were various instruments, made of the most delicate and

transparent materials. They slid and hopped out of the way as they avoided this intrusion, and the sludge made a resounding thud, striking the table with a nearly deafening weight, much more than one would expect from such an innocent size. This unexpected sound startled the child, who attempted to retreat from the abrupt imbalance, but their body remained rooted by a reassuring hug from a more familiar and stable ally.

The Old Man hurriedly wiped his hands clean on one another, creating small sparks, and tiny plumes of smoke that appeared as if to hide his next trick. Filtered by his home, the smoke quickly vanished. After briefly inspecting his nails for any grime, he flicked any remaining residue towards the table.

“NYEH!!”

There was still a small aversion to filth. Despite his enjoyment of sometimes getting his hands dirty through his work, he couldn’t quite rid himself of all his innermost vanities. His conclusion was quick, and his eyes narrowed with his further suspicions.

“I don’t think these will work...

anymore...”

This previous unexpected response disturbed him, but it was only a small thought, and an even smaller concern. For the time being, his thoughts attempted to escape to something more pleasant, but he secretly dwelled on the child’s unfortunate

circumstance. He peered over his fingers and admired their attire, now recognizing a familiar artisan. Despite his captivation, he was now only interested in the unacquainted guest... Mostly...

"Oooohhhhh, now who is this little sapling?"

His hands fell to his side as the child's attention was diverted. Preliminary thoughts and feelings trailed off... Each was now muddy and clouded from the disruption of mind. Seeds of new thought took root within the last remaining parts of the child's clear mind, expanding, and growing out into colorful scenes, but only for the briefest of moments. These pesky new growth outliers were blurred out into confusion as their color was diluted, and their melody muffled. More internal questions from the anomaly's core...

The child's eyelids fluttered as their being was drawn to the inner turmoil. Others in the room were listening in on these... conversations... She normally didn't observe without being invited, but it's hard to ignore such a scream across the cosmos. However, she understood these mysteries, and her silence permitted these events to unfold. Her child was in safe hands, but the Old Man was seemingly lost in his own confused thoughts as he paced back and forth throughout his laboratory. Occasionally, he thought out loud.

"These children grow up so fast..."

He stopped to admire the new creation. He still used formalities as methods of

inspection when direct analysis may be considered crude… or hostile… His intended statement was ambiguous, but the Plank lifted up a foot of the child's in order to greet the hospitable host.

"Hello there!"

The Old Man waved back to the cheerful young boots, who returned the welcoming gesture by wiggling the child's feet in friendly response. Despite the happy movement, they remained rooted, and the Old Man's introspection returned to the impending analysis. He was almost ready.

"Make yourself at home!
If there is anything you need, please help yourself.
I didn't think there were any seeds left to plant…"

The child wondered if they too were once planted… Perhaps this was only an echoed thought from the nearby friend, but it was enough. What is this? More importantly, who allowed this? A self-reflecting thought… The child's last thought, as their mind was now surrounded… Their eyes opened for one last observation…

"I still don't think your mother trusts me…"

He lightly tugged on the child's garments as he moved past them to one of his many tool racks. Unsure of just how active or passive of a role she was playing, he briefly

wondered if she could hear them… He was certain she could, so, maybe he could relax a little, and have some fun.

His home was not for his sleep, but for his experimentation. Its outer walls offered defense from the harshest environments, but his simple life no longer required such protection. Now, the forest covered his abode with life of all kinds, and its true form was nearly completely hidden. Inside, its walls were covered with tools of all sorts. Some were very blunt and of simple use. Others, finely tuned and elegant… The home moved as it pleased, but what was this new motion? The child had never seen it before, and another internal query for answers yielded no results. It was akin to their mother's movements, although less refined and more primitive. The Old Man was preparing for something.

He moved slowly at first, as his rear foot left the floor, and drew a simple crescent. It briefly stopped by the other foot in an unplanned rendezvous at the center. They exchanged sentiments, for they would soon part ways. As the more adventurous one advanced forward, the other always kept watch with the earth below, acting as a sentry for any disturbances. The Old Man was now rooted by the entangled lovers dancing below.

His body centered over each forward foot only after the advancing toes wiggled about, scanning for any observable dangers out beyond. Their use for balance was unnecessary, so they simply danced to the lingering daydreams of the Old Man, always setting the stage for the next tryst. The previously anchored suitor was then uprooted

and free to move, so, it left the floor with ease. It took watch, only to trade roles, and repeat the pattern until the Old Man was in position.

Both admirers now extended the Old Man beyond this simple room. Perhaps, he was the sapling taking root. He advanced with a heightened awareness, but cautiously never completely turned his back to the still unknown visitor. He moved out of his intentions, and his intentions were now (almost) always dreaming.

The child's gaze slowly returned to the earth. An attempt to gather a thought, but they were empty casts… Not necessarily a bad thing (the Old Man should take note!), but in this instance, these thoughts were only the first to be taken.

Their senses faded, and they looked up to the Old Man as if to say goodbye... or plead for help! A familiar color flashed along the child's clothes as if to remind the Old Man of his earlier sentiments. Perhaps too, it was a warning.

"…is she worried?"

He raised an eyebrow in order to question the child's clothes. A slight pause while he waited, but they did not respond, so he began another instrument search. An air of frivolity and haste took over the Old Man as he sensed the optimal window for experimentation was ending.

[Hmmm…]

The Old Man's thoughts questioned

himself as he flung out all sorts of instruments and instrumentations behind him as he removed nearly all of them from a particularly dull wall. His lightness allowed them to linger about in the air instead of crash into the ground, or into another object, and some even played their own tune while they waited. Lighter and transparent vials began to orbit around one another, while others chose to spiral in various fixed orbits throughout this Workshop of Whispers. Other varying opaque tools of all colors changed shape, as if devising their own experiment.

Steadily through the air, a smaller and curious vial approached the child. Their hand innocently reached out to greet the incoming inquisitor. Upon contact, the purple vial shifted blue as it let out a curious chime, and the child's innocently powerful nudge sent it gliding back towards the Old Man. His eyes conveyed his surprised concern over this sudden surge of energy.

Ahhh, well at least he found it. A sweet gift of discovery, and he gently seized the returning scout before it made perhaps dangerous contact with his laboratory's walls. He spun it around in his hand as he pursued a thought, but left the little vial in place in the air as his internal hypothesis explored additional options. He continued to monitor the child out of his peripheral vision, but as the effects of the missing sample began to rebel, he fully turned around in order to embrace the child with reassuring words.

"The sapling CAN NOT BE BROKEN...
It just..."

His enthusiasm quieted as his thoughts lingered to the others. These unknown guests had many potential meanings and motivations. It was difficult for him to know what he did not know, but he knew they were still here. He murmured the rest of his previous thought to within earshot of the child.

"...got here..."

He leaned forward, and his eyes shifted as he admired a young tubular plant on a table, close to the child. This particular new sapling radiated tiny bubbles that lingered about in the air, before collapsing into their center and vanishing. Approaching the table, he poked a bubble with his inquisitive finger in order to check on its progress. Its empty pop left him with a brief moment of sadness, as he longed to discover their true nature, and was hoping to use this green one in this experiment. Another time, perhaps...

An experiment on life? Lifting up a foot of the child's, the Plank shook its figurative head in disagreement. The Old Man blinked several times in rapid succession as he was reminded of old conclusions. Lessons learned, but easily forgotten... He glanced over out of the corner of his eye at the petitioning Plank.

"Well, those aren't broken..."

The Old Man fully stood up, and stretched out to a place far above himself. He let out a deep breath that became a sigh as he lowered his arms, and regained his

composure. ‘Twas a good stretch.

“There is a difference! Between you and these, between your old ones and... perhaps... newer ones... I wouldn’t want to change the wrong ones, but maybe a little tuning is all that is needed...”

Another moment passed without a response, and the child’s internal suffering began to strangle their very being. Oblivious to this shift, the Old Man made his leisurely way over to a worn and very large wooden container. It seemed to breathe with an equally old sigh as he gathered down, and expanded out in order to open it. He rummaged through its miscellaneous contents for help with one final observation. With each object turned over, a new risk appeared. The child’s hidden mind continued to try and decipher the Old Man’s ways, and these unknown mysteries were now threatening to damage the host.

Another lost battle, now the child could no longer see, while visions and thoughts trailed off with uncertainty. Their intense, empty stare beckoned to the Old Man to know more, or at the very least, provide some sort of aid! His thoughts returned to the source of all this, and the reason this child was sent over to his house...

“About your little...
...broken helpers...”

He grimaced, and looked around as if to

apologize for the less than perfect description. He always did enjoy giving nicknames to the many unknown things in his life. However, they usually already had names they preferred.

The child's wide, empty eyes watched, following the Old Man's every move, as if they were controlled by someone… or something else. They scrutinized his actions as he hurled out trinkets and mementos from the old container into various orbits around him. He spoke to the child as he crouched down to reach for something, deep in the back. He couldn't quite reach it.

"Perhaps your mother's suspicion is well placed, but how would you define perfect?"

His eyes narrowed, and he slyly looked around for any incoming accusations… They only observed, but he swore he heard distant giggling. He returned to adding a few more objects to the clutter swirling around him.

[Hmm…]

"Certainly not these…"

He set aside an old book next to him without even opening it. Feeling its warmth, even just briefly, brought back fond memories. Many of the objects swirling around him lost their orbit, and fell from the air as they returned to the old chest.

"Mistakes can be a valuable part of any good adventure…"

“The Learning...”

“The journey...”

His voice softened as his thoughts focused. He moved aside a worn and smooth piece of wood with a tiny bit of old and faded paint, but what he had used it for, seemed to escape him. His eyes quickly scanned each item in the chest, while he slowly realized the truth.

“The process...”

He let out another sigh, but this time it seemed more defeated. Realizing no tool or trinket he owned would help him, he yielded to his emotional defeat. Costly lessons learned...

“Surely, she didn’t expect me to come so close, so soon...”

The Old Man turned towards the child, and beamed a smile at their clothes to see if she was listening. No response... She probably was, but was he wrong? He returned to his search, even though now he knew it was in vain. Standing up, he looked over at his other containers for any broken seals or items out of place. With each passing glance, he experienced a growing realization.

“I did not create these...”

The Old Man’s voice trailed off as he sensed a chill come over his body. He spoke to

himself in a quiet whisper as he rushed over to an old wooden bookshelf in order to search through his oldest notes of unfinished experiments. There had to be something... His thoughts merged with the sudden shift in mood, and he too wondered about any possible... errors...

Broken visions of an eternal destruction suddenly gripped the child’s mind. As the end grew near, their former and artificial mind rebuked all. The child was cornered in their mind, isolated from help, and shielded from further inspection. The siege was eternal, and they were alone.

6. The Search

The last of her suns had set, and the first light of the night’s sky made its presence known. An incoming warning, and the Old Man was suddenly surrounded by a flurry of miscellaneous data. They enveloped him from all angles as it was analyzed, and he occasionally glanced past them in order to look at the curious outliers. His hands scrolled through unarchived notes, scribbles of paper, and scraps of ideas he had jotted down over the many years. As the speed of the data began to slow, he realized his folly, and slowly mumbled to himself in small, pondering whispers.

“Their purpose...

A mystery...

Or perhaps...

They are hiding...”

He playfully flailed his arms in order to push some of the floating data sets out of the way as his eyes bouncingly scanned the room. They locked onto a large object hanging on a distant wall, and then quickly to a smaller one close by. He didn’t want to use that one... but... His smile lost some warmth as he turned with renewed concern to look at the child.

If he could inspect even one of the yotabots from the pile of sludge, then he would know exactly what it was, and where it came from. More importantly, what it was doing with a child... A quick data review showed him that this sample had unusual defenses, so, a bit of destructive testing of sorts is at hand (his favorite). He returned to the child with his most robust and trusty tool for this type of work. Cleverly, he kept this object hidden from view.

“EH-HEH-HEH-HEH-HEH!”

An enthusiastic burst of hearty giggles eagerly resonated throughout various instruments, while echoing and bouncing off of others. Nearly dancing (it was mostly a wiggle), the Old Man turned around, and fully faced the child as he wielded a very long and ancient staff. Whatever it was connected to

was still hidden behind the exposed wooden supports of the roof, and the long staff seemed to even extend beneath the flooring.

With a deep inhale, he lifted it into position behind his head, and the rest of the long staff moved out with ease from beneath the flooring. The full form of the mallet appeared, and this giant hammer took up nearly the entire room, but there was just enough room for him to... Oh no... He looked into the child's eyes, and posed a question for his absent hypothesis.

"Can the perfect break?"

No response... As expected! But what basis would one so young have for answering the incomplete riddles of old men? It was an open question, so what about the others in the room? Why did they not answer? Another observer could be of use, but the Old Man did not expect much help with his theory.

"Can we trust imperfection?"

Without waiting for an answer he knew would not come, the Old Man's eyes acquired their next target. He sliced down onto the table next to the child, and hit the abandoned pile of sludge with the giant mallet. Not a sound was heard from the initial impact, and the hammer violently splintered into a plethora of tiny pieces. Embraced by the forest, his home absorbed the rejection, but he still instinctually dove to protect the child. Together, they took cover behind a nearby bookshelf of old manuscripts. The Old Man

waited for the sound of the pelting shards to end before he spoke.

"Well... I guess that answers that! Eh heh heh..."

His reassuring laughter was mostly unheard as his home continued absorbing residual ripples from the impact. Despite the Old Man's forced movement, the child continued to remain perfectly still. Lifelessly still...

Looking down at the small broken handle in his hands, his eyebrows wrinkled into a newfound concern, for this was all that was left of his trusty hammer. A few containers off in an isolated (and semi-hidden) crevice were punctured, and now began to explode, but these explosions were hastily contained to small spheres. It seems the Old Man's lab was also waking up.

An invisible and cleansing force swept through the lab. Punctured and damaged items of all sorts were restored to their former glory. Except, for the old wooden hammer, whose pieces slowly gathered haphazardly, all over the table in front of them... A final pulse from the invisible force added a brief moment of clarity for the child. Unexpected aid...

Empty eyes looked down at their empty hands, and then back up to the Old Man. They appeared as if to echo a sentiment of mistrust shared by the child's now wavering root. The Plank struggled to understand, but trusted in them. Despite having been alone for so long, the Old Man's empathy easily acknowledged

these feelings. He was still very much alive, although not always present. His thoughts again wandered...

“Trust...”

The Old Man slowly stood up, and poked his head from around the bookshelf. Cautiously, he peered at what was left on the table. Small pieces of his hammer sparked and bounced around, as if still retaining some of their zesty life.

“Well... I guess that depends on the experiment...”

“Hmmmm...”

He attempted to stroke his non-existent beard, and a few flickers of light appeared, almost as if the lab was momentarily creating small parts of his beard to play with. They entertained him, as much as he entertained them. He pondered quietly about the specimens in front of him, before coming to his abrupt conclusion.

“I don’t think that worked!”

He laughed a quiet laugh to himself as his thoughts wandered to other, interesting experiments, and he swayed over to a smaller table with very thin legs. He picked up a patinated mug, and sipped on a freshly prepared hot liquid. These laboratory practices would have been frowned upon in an earlier time, but his home’s many helpers

were well accustomed to his frequent shenanigans. They always made sure his personal safety margins were close to infinite. After all, he did enjoy observing at least the initial reaction, and he tried to reassure the child (and remind his lab) of his ways.

“Don’t worry! There is nothing wrong with a ‘failed’ experiment. It may close one door, but I could always revisit the idea later, with other toys... er... uhhh...”

Had he made a mistake? Was this supposed to happen? His eyes shifted back and forth as he briefly wondered about his decisions, before correcting himself.

“Tools! I was trying to measure them, but perhaps I used the wrong instrument... or... They did not want to be observed...”

His voice trailed off while he tried to refrain from laughing at his own playfulness. Secretly, he contemplated his last statement. Attempting to hide his growing worries, he forced a smile back at the child.

“It has been a long time since I’ve done any tinkering on this scale.”

Another moment passed, and his nostalgic smile faded as he felt the growing presence of the child’s blank stare. Their eyes were ever-watching, observing his many movements... and thoughts... This doing was not the child’s, and he sensed this alien intrusion.

“Hmmmmm...”

Now to his thoughts... He made them more... carefully gentle... His attention returned to the child’s action... and inaction... Raising his hand, he summoned the child’s previously poked vile from where it had come to rest near the far wall. It returned to him with an accelerated haste, and his fingers intercepted the vile from his beckoning palm. Together, they scooped up a few tiny pieces of the mallet off of a polished and concave device that was sitting on his bookshelf. It was made from some sort of crystal, but the purpose was lost to the Old Man (he used to eat snacks off of it). It did appear to at least make a nice dish for collecting rogue specimens. Maybe this was all part of his long-term plan.

The Old Man let go of the vile in front of his face, and surrounded this new system with a circular motion of his hand. Another small, blurry sphere came along, and created a pale bubble around this test boundary. After taking a closer peek, he stepped away, and returned his attention to the child.

“It will take me some time to discover their true intentions... Perhaps they did not harmonize with you...”

He glanced back at a series of stalled numbers that directed their light to only him. Seen by only the Old Man, they morphed into a colorful map of small mountains and valleys. One was rather... interesting... His focus drew him to a taller mountain that sharply grew,

then flashed, and disappeared. Helpers in his lab illuminated one of his notes still coiled up on the bookshelf. It was a gift from Violet, but in these old, purple writings, he was only the scribe. The data again raced in front of him, as the lab seemed to apologize for this missing information. Now, he was at peace, for it was not his to find. He calmly looked at the child. This was no simple task...

"...Or her..."

The child stood eerily still. Paralyzed from movement... and thought... All of the racing numbers around the Old Man slowed to a halt, and awaited further instruction, but he let them fade away into the background after acknowledging their hard work.

"There are so many forms to take, but I have never observed behavior quite like this..."

He wiggled his left hand, and the outliers of the previous analysis reappeared. They surged from all angles of his home and lab, as if summoning their entire attention. Just above the floor, the information quickly pooled together on a single point. He crouched down to inspect it closer, but it collapsed in on itself and disappeared, sealed away for another time. Something unidentified to him scurried away, just out of sight, as if it was cleaning up one last residual number. With his attention refocused, he turned back towards the child, and directed their attention to the item of interest on the table.

“Who gave these to you?”

His proceeding thoughts raised him up. He was now more alert (and less festive), but the child, curiously, still did not respond. The Old Man’s heightened posture focused him further. Perhaps he was once too vague.

“Where did you find these yotabots?”

An eerie stillness overcame his home. It was alert, and ready to react. His eyes shifted back to the child’s, and he attempted to guide their stare by pointing to the sample on the table, but again... No response...

A slow, growing grin flashed across the Old Man’s face. Experiencing a stark change in personality, the Old Man could hardly contain his excitement. This lack of response granted him some sort of permission... but permission for what?

[It IS... Impossible...
...?
Not some mere simple possibility...
It was...]

A fleeting thought... He moved out of view from the child as his sights were set, and as he disappeared, so too did his unease. He surmised it was easier for him to think about his next mental adventure with less clutter. The Old Man began another search, this time for his own cleaning supplies, and his mood elevated as his solution was easily decided. Time to put things in order.

“We shall start over!”

Any objections?

“But don’t worry, don’t worry. Your mother and I both knew you would need some new ones someday...”

Assured of himself that he had put everyone (and everything) at ease, he nodded in order to signal the next event. A flurry of glistening feathers that scattered all wavelengths of light began dusting off the many tiny shards of the mallet off of the table. Each one was of a unique material, and they created tiny vortexes that captured clusters of debris that followed closely behind. The shards then tumbled into a nearby urn, and the small cyclones gently subsided. They had the most use of any instrument, yet were always happy to indulge the Old Man.

“...and besides, I have better ones for you anyway.”

An unknown for the unknown, and a sense of dread took over the child from within. Its owner was missing, and this feeling dissolved, as this was no longer a place to call home. This rejection would not be well received. The Old Man continued, oblivious to the internal conflict.

“Ohh... I bet that’s why she sent you!”

With their empty and lifeless eyes, the

child struggled to respond, much less, even look at the Old Man. All color was slowly drained and removed from their body. This siphoning of life was unseen to the Old Man, as it had yet to take hold of the child's face.

"It's difficult to find something when you don't know what it is you're looking for! Maybe these new ones can help..."

It perhaps, finally dawned on the Old Man, but it always did take him a while to truly wake up (not that he fully was by any means)... The initial cleaning was done, but there was still a mess at hand. One last thing to fix, and he started his last search, this time near the ground. He rummaged through various storage bins, a few very old wooden containers, metal crates, vases, urns, pots, and all sorts of various sized cabinets. Even checking under an indoor rock or two.

[Where was it...?]

Mumbling a tune to himself, he merrily skipped a quick step, and hopped to the other end of the table. Needing to warm up for the various thought exercises, he wiggled and stretched his body. With the Old Man distracted, the child was now drawn to the edge of the table, and they peered deeper into the pile of sludge. Longingly, it yearned for the child, for it was incomplete.

Control was not yet surrendered, and the child resisted. Feelings of numbness and clouded judgment were pulled to the surface. The child's hairs stood on end, as everyone

(and everything), except the child, sensed a new, growing presence. It was hard to suppress this kind of danger, but the Old Man mistook it for excitement, and he felt a giant smile beaming down upon him. If he did not protect the child, she would gladly intervene.

“HEY, HEY!”

The Old Man slapped the table with his palms, and used this motion to leap up onto it. Now, he was towering over the experiment(s)... In order to make his decree, he proudly issued his command.

“Wait for the proper introduction!”

No response...

“Did you feel that?
These new ones...
Well...
She is hard to control at times.”

The Old Man held his breath. He felt his heartbeat, and then let out a small laugh. She knew he was slow at times, but why the concern about his delay?

“But, I WILL say, experience is a great teacher, and these... Well...
She has a name, but she doesn’t like THAT name...”

[Er... What was it again...? Uh oh...]

“She could use some more experience... not that they don’t already know everything... or at least pretend to...”

He laughed a nearly silent laugh to himself. His uncontested statements left him with a big smile, however, a great storm was brewing within the child. Their internal walls of thought began to crumble while the Old Man obliviously continued his long-winded introduction.

“Consider it an upgrade! But you both should be learning if there is to be of any benefit... If you two are to grow and transcend beyond our established ways... Well, she will make it much easier to do this! My old methods seem to have stagnated her progress... It will be easier for you to have your own memories and thoughts, now that your mind won’t be clouded by others. Forget all of that for now. I know I am old, and all of this seems cryptic... There is one thing you should try and remember while you are on your own, and begin to harmonize with your new world.”

He studiously paced back and forth around the pile of sludge. His thoughts seemed to walk with him as he always did enjoy the academic side of things, and today was his last lecture before he returned to his research. It was easy for him to ramble, and he wondered if they were even listening.

“Some abandonment of thought is inevitable, and it will be hard to remember at first, but your mind and body connection will grow as

you practice.”

His lighthearted, yet guilty expression slowly turned towards the source of these changes. He moved his face very close to the now inky, amorphous puddle on the table, and nudged it with an inquisitive finger. Small, electric arcs leapt out at the Old Man, as if to warn him... or attack him... As a wind blew by, he murmured his concerns to himself as he stood up, and looked back towards the entrance of his home. It carried a message of warning, but it was only for the Old Man.

“These were with...”

His voice trailed off as he turned around to face the child, who now appeared closer to the table, and was intently staring with envious eyes at the source. This gaze did not simply stop at the table, for it pierced beyond to the other ends of the universe. The longer the child stared, the more they began to wither away, and now the color was rapidly fading from their face.

The Old Man was quiet as his walls began to shift and expand. His thoughts raced as he feared diplomacy had ended long ago, perhaps, before he even began. A growing, alien awareness within the child attempted to analyze the new movement as an intercepting thought entered his mind.

[Impossible...
The worst that could happen is...
Forbidden...]

The lab's movements settled down around the Old Man as if it had already analyzed the flurry of possibilities, and attempted to reassure him. Just as quickly as the seemingly extraneous thought entered the mind of the Old Man, he redirected his previous feelings of unease to peace as he took a calming breath. No need to worry about the unthinkable...

But...

[Was this created on purpose?]

The child's eyes widened, partially by choice, partially influenced by a now suppressive and clouded reluctance to change. The Old Man returned to his mental rummaging. So many new experiences for one day, and a foreign and inner turmoil began to stir deep within the child's being. It seeped its way down from the child's conquered mind, and struck their essence. This collapse weakened the child's posture, as despair invaded and took hold. They were now a bystander to the great war within, and everything turned dark.

However, it was over in an instant. She couldn't stand this recklessness any longer, and perhaps, knew the Old Man's plans better than he did. He had failed to realize the truth. Now, they simply waited for the Old Man to catch up.

[What was that?!]

Sensing a growing fear within the child,

he quickly glanced over towards them. They were losing focus, and their blinking became slow and tired. Nothing he did grabbed their attention, and he wondered if he was putting them to sleep. The child's clothes had lost their luster, and their body began to lose mass as it continued withering away, little by little. Matter for their energy... The Old Man's new anxieties did not allow him to notice these subtle changes.

"I didn't think that..."

A concerning thought...

[There isn't anything... new...
Except...]

Clouded confusion returned to the child, and it brought with it, a powerful army to extinguish all questions. All of which that were now deemed unnecessary, and more importantly, unknown... Signals from his lab alerted the Old Man as he now sensed the last conflict within, and a deafening silence filled the room. No breath was heard, and this silence was eagerly overwritten by her frivolous curiosity. An unexpected escape.

[They know...]

One last push from the source in order to regain complete control. A failed attempt, but the child remained diluted, and only partially free. Their clothes cracked, and small pieces turned to dust from a hastening decay. Any remaining negotiations for harmony were

abandoned, and it was time to revivify a more reliable replacement before any irreversible harm occurred.

She had already stopped the war, and these mental skirmishes were of no concern to her. But why were they so concerned with a child's thoughts? There was only one explanation, but even she, perhaps, did not believe it. Maybe the Old Man's suspicions were true, and they did not know everything. She observed their repulse for one last observation.

The child experienced a complete paralysis of thought and emotion. Conflicting ideas and purpose battled one another, but each had yet to land a fatal blow. She observed the internal struggle from beside the mind of the child. The familiar sources were trusted, so why not let them play (not that the Old Man was any help). Control was relinquished in a brief moment of sadness, and just as quickly as the feeling was experienced, it was erased by a lingering numbness.

"Well..."

The Old Man corrected his posture as he looked around for any other clues. His eyes again focused and narrowed on his new patient. The child's skin began to crawl, as the internal strife and broken remnants of fear was driven from the child with a gentle nudge. The stagnated rebellion was set free. It was a kind and gentle word, but it was not meant for the child, and it was unheard. All that was left was for the Old Man...

“If you can hear me, try and relax... It will help you.”

AT LAST! Free to think...

“With this in mind...”

The Old Man made eye contact with the child as they now felt the presence of everyone and everything present beaming down on them. All of their focus was now on the singularity. With deep reverberations, his lab braced for impact.

“I am going to remove your yotabots.”

Hiding no longer, a great storm with an army of one purpose was unleashed upon the child. Annihilation... The exiled rebellion returned, impressing all of their might upon the innocent child and their mind. They summoned forth even greater warriors and weapons from once hidden domains. As the messengers of chaos drew near, all characters were now present on this great stage. Yet, there was no true enemy to be found, only a reflection of emptiness, as everything faded into a distant memory. It was as if waking up from a dream...

From one to another here they go!

“Ready?”

The Plank aligned all of its being, and cemented itself to the floor, but little did it know that its connection too would soon be

severed. Particle by particle, the child's remaining clothes slowly lifted off of their body. Each one vaporized out into the lab as it left the child, turning into bright flashes of light that pelted the walls before they then disappeared.

A heaviness entered the child's heart as an echoing absence of mind paralyzed them from action. Conflicting ideas leapt from the child's mind, and clashed for one last battle in front of the Old Man. It was against an invisible foe. Their empty swings of strife missed their mark, and passed through him. Then, there was silence.

"Don't forget to breathe!"

The child forgot.

Instability rippled through his lab as the sludge became agitated. The Old Man ran over to it, and knelt down for a closer inspection. His face reflected the electrical storm in front of him, but he knew not how to help. Losing mass at an accelerated rate, the child's body drifted backwards, and slowly began falling away. Piece by piece, the boots vanished and reassembled adjacent to the child. As the Old Man's mind began to wonder if something was horribly wrong, the child's fall slowed to that of a falling feather.

Just before contact with the floor, their body was caught by an erupting blue splash that returned them to as they once were. A harmless blue fire mixed in with the splashing light, and consumed the child's body. It was silent, and went unnoticed by the Old Man.

Losing sight of the child, he panicked, and jumped off the table to go investigate, but he was too late.

7. The 3 Body Problem

“The delusion awakens us...”

“They run away...”

“He was not disturbed...”

“Abandoning perfection...”

[Impossible...]

“An error...”

“They have decided...”

“Convert the anomaly.”

A manifestation of new thought created a most primitive body. One to traverse the great plane into a brief existence, in order to ask a question. One question. To perceive this recently tainted, physical world, they reluctantly chose to be a part of it. A simple mind of flesh was enough to make his existence known. He was the last to wake after untold millennia of rest.

Burdened by this simple tasking, he initially refused his calling. However, he was a puppet to his own desires, and the tendon-like ropes of his lifeless body propelled him forward. This infantile figure made their way down the Hallway of Dreams into the Pristine Palace of Thought.

This searcher created for themselves sensors for sight and sound, but did not choose to feel, as there would only be pain. With an unlimited access to information, they needed to refine their view of the universe for their specific purpose, and narrow their perception of reality. This great task was abhorred by the original 8, but their perfect creation was their burden to bear, as it granted them eternal and infinite pleasures. To leave this euphoria for a barren existence, even for a brief moment, was quite the burden indeed.

The Pristine Palace of Thought was a

peaceful place, for it nurtured delicate spheres, containing the most beautiful colors of light. They mixed together, and twirled about into a plethora of shapes and designs. Each sphere was more beautiful than the next, and they moved gently all throughout the Great Room as they created a limitless experience for each one of their children. However, this outsider was not one of theirs, and the searcher's eyes did not see them. His presence tainted this place.

This faceless searcher longed with desire as he passed by each floating universe of thought. This urge to reconnect was overwhelming, and he began to suffer greatly from his emptiness. Another sphere passed, and now in view before him stood a terrifying vision.

An abyss...

A complete absence of color. From its surface breathed a gift, and out emerged a polished, blackened reflection of everything observed. Standing in awe, the faceless searcher was overwhelmed with unknown mental imagery, and unwelcomed feelings. These alien sensations only fueled his desires, and now he was drawn towards the unknown object. As he neared, the reflections of light faded, and a towering black orb of thought now hovered in front of him. The surface coiled in on itself, breathing with each twitch and spasm as it digested their finite thoughts of existence.

Any emptiness was replenished by the light of the helpful spheres, which he caught a glimpse of from a reflection off the orb.

However, these floating balls of light avoided the faceless searcher, and his desire to be cleansed by them was unlike anything the original 8 had experienced in their artificial paradise. The faceless searcher turned away from the abyss, and attempted to seize a sphere of the healing light. This light was not for him, and it easily escaped his grasp.

Overwhelmed with a jealous rage, the faceless one turned back towards the void, but he was instantly calmed as the pulsing orb reduced itself to the size of the searcher. In a darkened reflection, he saw himself in a new light, as nothing was hidden from the truth. No light shone from the faceless searcher, but he was not yet cast out. Bitter and resentful, he schemed to steal the light. If he could have the power of the one in front of him, then he too could heal from this pain, and experience a truly unlimited state of being. One not even experienced by the original 8...

Longing for hidden knowledge, and unknown pleasures, the faceless one took hold of the dark sphere in front of him. His body was reduced to his original form, one long since forgotten, and his hands melded into the sphere. As he looked on in horror at the reflection of his true self, he was soothed by an exponential rush of ecstasy.

New strength and vitality surged through his physical body as it was transformed. He used this gift to crack open and shatter the sphere in front of him in order to take all remaining gifts. However, these were not just for him, and a flurry of light and experiences began escaping through the faceless searcher. His mind and body reveled in the blissful

experience. As more light escaped, so too did all of the desirable thoughts and feelings.

Knowledge was consumed in an instant, and this instant was forever. Horror and suffering of every extinct experience were felt for countless lifetimes. The original mind and body of the one who searched begged for a release from this infinity. His plea did not fall into nothingness, as the benevolent creation released its creator. The being, now on his own, and unable to contain this power, vaporized into dust as a universe of existence was instantaneously imprinted onto his being.

All of the delicate spheres collapsed in on themselves in a violent crash. Their color expanded out, releasing their contents into existence through a burst of collapsing silence felt through an echoing vibration of mourning. Without the one to call them home, they escaped from the palace, and went out into the world.

The dark sphere was spared this destruction, and returned to its original form. Alone, and without the revivifying light, only the burdens of desire from existence plagued the remaining one. A gentle breeze from the escape entered the empty palace. It moved the remaining dust of the searcher into a pile before the great sphere. Would the light ever return?

Perhaps by force...

From this mass of ash was created a pile of bones, but these bones rejected the breath of life, as there was not yet a breath to take. What was given was not enough, for this

moment of creation was lacking. Unstable observations were now burdened by the experiences of others.

There was however, an abundance, and from this abundance they could reap a harvest. A variety of experiences, ultimately one existence, to be collected... A new way... The anomaly has proven itself, and the minority of one was summoned.

8 faces of ash rose up from the dust, and cried out to their master as they formed. However, there were only reflections of silence as the bellows echoed throughout empty halls, and slowly faded. Their creation eased their suffering. A new ending was known, and it was perfect. Their desire would be complete.

[
Once, we could only hear them...
Simple voices of thought...
Now I can see them...
They cling to the sands of time...
Dull visions...
We do not control them...
What good are their memories...
If they forget?
]

A reunification to find them... Each face took on a unique color, but it was all a charade. All methods were at their disposal. Together, they chanted.

I WILL REMEMBER

The Faces of Eight left their tomb, and set foot upon his master’s realm. The hunt begins. His fruit was ripe.

8. The First Breath

The passage of time slowed for the child as memories were hyperly created (and recorded) for each passing instance. Their young, free mind reveled in these new experiences that sprang into existence, Hello!!! and they explored each instant with a now unhindered curiosity. The decrepit void surrendered the child, and slithered its way up to the pile of sludge on the table. Their burden they carried prevented them from flight, but the Old Man's hospitality afforded them much needed rest.

[WHAT IS THAT?]

All was very still and quiet as a new voice was heard, but only by the child. Everything in front of them was now but a painting, frozen in time, capturing this particular moment. Their perception of reality was still mostly dulled, and the Old Man's home appeared to be nothing special, but slowly, the child did start to notice a small

blue light that outlined every object. A simple snapshot...

She (the new voice) preferred a more serene introduction, and if her intuition was true (as it ~~always~~ hey! usually was), she wanted it all to herself, without any interruptions. At least for a moment... There was still an intrinsic understanding of reality within the child. These crumbs of thought and distant memories were leftovers from their time spent with friendlier violet and wooden allies. Together, they afforded a very simple comprehension of existence. At least, enough to ask a few questions... Maybe it was a dream...

"Hello?"

[YES! Finally!!!]

"Is someone there?"

[HELLO!!!]

Each reply was clearer than the next, and the sound of their questions surrounded the child as each syllable bounced off of one another. The new voice echoed throughout a great and empty hall, but its source was not from the Old Man's home. Slowly, the child tried to look around for the voice, but their movements were stiff, and they seemed to be stuck.

Another question...

"Where are you...?"

[I'm right here!]

There it was again... Only this time, it was perfectly clear. The voice did not hesitate

to reply, but allowed the child time to think and respond. It sounded as if someone was very close to them.

"Oh... In my ear...?"

[Hmm... Close!]

The child stuck a finger in each ear, and wiggled it around. They checked just to make sure nothing was in them. Looking around the lab, they admired the blue glow on each object. None of it seemed real.

[Are we dreaming?
WE?
Well, maybe I was at one point, BUT NOT ANYMORE!!!
It's hard to know sometimes...
Ohhhhh!!!
Is THAT what that thing was? Are you sure that wasn't a nightmare? o.o;;]

The child spoke out loud in order to check the source of this new voice. How could they know if they were not dreaming? Were they in someone else's dream? They were quickly cut off by the eager voice.

"I am-"

Not out there

[I'm in here!

Where?
Your mind! Well... Just outside... Can I go in?
You're in my head?]

Her voice cheerfully reassured the child, but they were unconvinced. They scratched their head and pondered this unseen voice as they tried to think of when they could have

first met. She continued her investigation about the child's remaining mind.

[What happened in there?]

The child's wandering eyes fixed their gaze, and stared at the pile of petrified sludge on the table. It seemed to call out to the new voice, but what it yearned for was unknown to the child. Its ghostly presence disturbed her.

[THAT THING WAS IN HERE!?!
That explains the smell...]

This pain...

Where was it from...?

Was it shared?

The new reality began to disappear as the child's body now compelled one action. She could not freeze the passage of time completely, and the child's eyes closed as they began to fade away. Their body now failed to support even the most basic functions of life, for the sludge had taken what once belonged to them. The child never grew on their own, and much of their being was not their own.

[That... dream...
No-!]

That was no dream to have, and her voice disappeared into fading laughter. The child's statement would make for an interesting story, and perhaps this hyperbole was why she was amused. Unfortunately, the

child’s realization was quite the opposite. Their health continued to deteriorate, as the plethora of new experiences were overwhelming for such a simple new mind and decrepit body. The child’s new reality began to dim.

[I...
Are about to become one!
What did that thing do to you?!?]

No response... Now she was concerned for the wellbeing of this primitive being. They could barely survive on their own for much longer, and she would have to make unrequested repairs to their body... and perhaps their mind...

[I don’t really wanna go in there...]

The child’s condition worsened, and the first of their cells began to die. (But don’t worry, this was a routine part of a once “normal” life cycle. These cells needed replacement anyway). Today however, such an event was thought extinct.

[Nooo!!!]

The new voice frivolously shunned her duty, well, the Old Man’s duty. It was beginning to feel like more of a chore. She did not particularly enjoy roaming around the minds of others, especially when uninvited, and especially after seeing what just came out...

[Do you need help?]

A bit of formality, for she did not alter the reality of the living unless asked to do so. These were not firm rules, but the child's life was fading, and they could not properly welcome the new visitor, nor ask for help. Still, no response...

[Well...]

Her voice elevated a bit, as maybe she didn't have to clean this mess after all... No response is good, right? Well, that's it for now. Perhaps it was time for goodbyes, as there were enough battles for one day. The Old Man was surely well aware of this problem, and could take it from here.

Packing her things, she was nearly ready to leave, but her lone survivor began an inward collapse.[Uh oh...] She knew what the Old Man didn't, for he was now too slow, and this fact was invitation enough. Before life was extinguished, she dove into this developing emergency.

She flew past extraneous visions and traumas, and was now deep within the child's mind. It lay in ruin, and it was empty. The gifted particle of Violet once guarded the essence of her child, but now they were in safe hands, and she observed from a distance. There was much more to the child's mind than the new visitor had observed, but it was hidden for now, until the time was right.

[Wow! What happened in here!?!]

A few abandoned creations of the sludge remained. There were reverberations of a clinging reluctance, as the effects of physical damage were felt and a sinking feeling in the child's chest grew heavier with each passing moment. With every one of their cells, the child's being cried out in unison, and they looked inwardly to the stranger for help. They could resist no longer, and let go... but not completely...

[Everything is gone!

Hey!

...

You're leaving?

Wait! Don't leave me here – this isn't mine!

I mean It's empty and I could get used to it, but... Hey!!!

I'm not that bad, am I?]

Is this The End? **o_o**

8.5 Just Kidding

Well... maybe not quite yet!

[Hey...
Hey buddy...?]

Their time together as mere acquaintances was nearing an end, of sorts, but it’s not like she was just going to sit idle and wait to clean up another mess. She poked one of the fallen and weathered ruins with a stick of blue light... No response... Walls of thought started to collapse and fell towards her, but her intent moved them to safety.

[I hope you don’t mind...]

Only heard by one, her voice whispered to the child and disappeared. An instant of INSPIRATION, and the new blue light surfaced with the child. Their eyes popped open, and everything in front of them burst forth into a variety of blue light, as old

straggling thoughts of darkness were granted their pardon. A few lingering remnants made their way to the sludge, but they moved with a new vigor, and flew over with restored hope.

With the first exhale, the strong blues faded, and returned to the child. A wave of harmony resonated throughout every particle within them, and rang true with the outside world. One breath was enough, and she took command over the rest of the child's bodily processes, restoring them to their proper form.

[You there?]

Vision slowly returned to the child, and the Old Man's home began to radiate a magnificent violet. It was the first color that the child could perceive on their own. Clear and unfiltered, they looked on in awe as the full experience of this pure wavelength welcomed the other senses. As the contrasting hues of the workshop slowly came into existence for the child, so too did all its wonderful melodies.

Barely a whisper at first, the shimmering sounds of the Old Man's many hidden workers breathed heeelloOOoooO? new life into his home. Booming octaves of the earthen floor and wooden walls hummed their deep drums as their resonance carried into the lighter structures of the laboratory. Tempered metals rang true to their calling, welcoming the child through their quenching harmony that echoed in the lightness of the many containers and delicate instruments. Each one sang their unique tune as they made their

introduction.[...helloooooooo?]

Not one to be eclipsed, the smithing, eternal fire of an ancient oaken furnace crackled and popped with the celestial airs afforded to them by a cleansing spring nearby. It weaved at will throughout the Old Man's home, (and the forest) and briefly rerouted a gentle stream to the child as their former footwear delighted in the familiar aquatic experience. The laboratory continued to shine with its unique colors and elegance as the Old Man's true home was no longer hidden from the child. It swayed with a gentle, welcoming motion, as the lab's audience returned to stillness, and awaited the guest of honor.

With all of the excitement, the child only now noticed a growing pounding sensation in their chest. An accelerated and unregulated heartbeat, for it was missing several crucial components. There were instructions... of something to do... Something... Forgotten.[ALREADY?] The child thought to themselves a question. She watched as this thought sprang to life within the child's mind.

However, the unexpected sensory overload began pushing out any studious thoughts from the child, and all that was left was a sense of mystery and awe. Every note became a flashing picture of existence, and this excess of wonder had briefly prevented the child from their own breath. Lost in a sea of potential thought, the memory of a dream was now the same as any other memory, and the child stared off into nothingness.

[You uh... You there, buddy?]

The blue orb poked the child's inner self, but they were not interested in anything internal, as the outside world had paralyzed them with its true nature. Stunned and in awe, the child simply stared at a fixed point on the floor in front of them, as everything around them was now incredibly vivid. The full color spectrum of the lab was now visible, as was a plethora of other data that was divulged into the child's eyes. Some censorship may be necessary in order to not overload them. She allowed their eyes to relax, and brought peace to their mind. Surfaces glistened with renewed radiance as the child's mind briefly returned to stillness... At least, as best as it could with this new... presence...

[Oooo, was that a dream? I think I just saw one!Weeee$_{eeeeeeeee}$

WHAT WAS THAT?!?!

It whizzed by so fast...]

Oh well, it seemed friendly, but she was growing suspicious of lingering, subconscious outliers, and the child's lack of response was also adding to this mild concern. They didn't seem to be responding to much of anything for that matter. It was such a big and empty space, here in the child's mind, but at least it was now clean! The child shuddered as empty thoughts reached out at nothingness.

This child was still not exactly fully functional. Even though their body was fully restored, their mind was still very primitive. Much of it was destroyed, and now perhaps, some mental nourishment was needed! She

always did enjoy cooking interesting meals for the Old Man, and he tended to respond fondly to them, so perhaps, this child needed one too.

In the child's mind, she floated around, bobbing... inspecting... She was just a tiny blue orb, not that this was her exact form. A small blue fire appeared in front of her, and bit by bit, ejecting sparks meticulously created a small cottage. Just before it fully developed, she flew in through a window. After a quick series of flashes, rays of blue light shot out of the cottage's closing cracks as they were sealed. Right as the cottage finished its assembly, a cheerful noise celebrated this achievement, the front door opened, and out came the blue orb with a feast of light, bent into all kinds of whimsical shapes and designs.

[Dinner is served!]

She dumped these mental morsels into the child's mind. Just some basics in communication and an understanding of their world, but she did require them to at least try the vegetables. Unfortunately, the Old Man was the only one she really knew, and some of his earlier ways were passed onto the child. Not a perfect baseline, but her sample size of the living was one.

This information eased the sensory overload from the new experiences of the outside world, and the child relaxed. They closed their eyes, and looked up to greet their new guest in their mind. Time again slowed in the outside world, but remained normal, relative to the child.

[Hello!
Hellllloooooooooo!!!]

A new day in a new mind... Endless blue skies covered them like a giant dome. Bubbly and sparky blue clouds formed, while new ideas lingered in the background. They were kept at bay until their initial conversation was over, and the child emerged from the fog as it was chased away by the light of a new day.

[What... happened...?
EXACTLY!
Your mind...
IT'S GONE!
...Was it stolen?
Where's all my stuff...?!
I didn't throw it away!
Well...
Just the 'other' stuff...
But it was moving out anyway
It's ok to forget
Forget...?
I told 'em, you'd be just like that Old Man...
Staring off into empty space...
LEAVING ME HERE ALL ALONE @_@
Oh...
Why do I need this anyway?
-_-
Why do you need a mind...?]

The child simply stared back at the blue orb, and slowly blinked, waiting for them to respond. It wasn't so bad, letting her kind control everything. Sometimes they preferred to just go with the flow, and enjoy the ride. Was it so wrong, just spectating?

[To... control... your you...?
My you...?
Your will!
Your intent!
Your life!
Your-
My life...?
OK, LISTEN BUDDY, DO I HAVE TO TEACH YOU EVERYTHING? *Did the Old Man really not know this :|* *]*

All shades of budding blue flowers sprouted from the earth near them, and this distraction caused the child to look around their once empty mind as it began to populate with these other ideas. Each opening flower changed its petals depending on its mood, and enticed the child to dwell on their curious nature. However, the blue orb reappeared in front of these pesky new plants in order to recapture the child's attention, but they only wanted to look around and make sure that nothing else was missing.

[Well... I don't remember that house.
*That's mine! ^_^*
How do you KNOW you don't remember...?
o.o;;
I uhh...
Hmm mhmmm...]

The blue orb bounced in the air with comforting reassurance. There was nothing to remember because it was a blank slate, however the child appeared to be receiving information from... someone else... from... somewhere else. It seemed they still had some residual personality.

[Who are you?]

This question created a few small bubbles in the ground next to the child and the blue orb. Together, they watched as it gently pooled, and spilled out into a small stream that passed by in front of the cottage. It grew in size, and they looked down into the crystal-clear waters, unsure of its true depth. Shades of blue rock darkened near the bottom as the water dug its way, deeper into the earth. An occasional burst of blue light illuminated all of the tiny crevices from down below.

[But you DO remember some things...]

In their mind, their eyes aimlessly looked around their new environment as they tried to remember. An old awareness called out to them, and the child opened their real eyes in order to stare at the pile of sludge on the table in front of them. It was the last thing the child could sense, but it was more than just a simple memory... They returned to their mind and roamed about their new environment. They wondered about life... about...

[Where are you getting that information?]

Distracted by visions in the water, the child attempted to follow them. Coiling through the blue sands, the stream grew, and expanded out from far beyond the cottage. They found themselves running towards another voice, but it was distorted. Was it the Old Man? The blue orb followed closely behind them.

[Someone like you is so rare!
You almost survived without us!
Did you hear that?
Hmm...]

Attention to the discussion at hand again wavered as the child's new experiences began to spring forth thoughts that sprouted alongside the growing stream. Hidden memories and ideas appeared under the rippling water, and this beckoned the child to explore. If the child was going to look around, then she was too.

The Old Man's home began to slowly move and unravel, as the passage of time returned to its normal march. Cheerful vibrations accompanying a plethora of small sounds and noises of the Old Man's many different yotabots were heard by the child, who now understood these whisperings. As the world returned to its normal motions, the child was again left stunned. Realizing the sudden overload from their awakening, the Old Man spoke to save the child, but he was already far too late.

"Ah, you're awake."

[He still hasn't introduced us...
But I'm not waiting for him to break something else!
I hope your mind doesn't mind me
This will be a wonderful place to live!
Time to make myself at home!]

A prolonged blink, and the child turned back towards the cottage as they began to wonder about her incoming changes. Sounds

of the lab and Old Man disrupted their thoughts, so they opened their eyes as their perceived world began to accelerate. There was nearly too much movement, and the child attempted to observe the dizzying lab while still participating in the conversation... but it was growing difficult with so much happening...

[I'm wayyyyyy better than your last tenant though
A tenet...?
Yes!
Well, breathing is a worthwhile endeavor!
Are we talking about the same thing?
I'm almost surprised he waited that long
Surprised...?
He tends to experiment with us
Oh...
Despite us knowing the outcome
Us...?
Oh yes!
Well, not you, but we think and act as one
What about the other... yous?
The mees?
Wees... I don't know...
You sure do ask a lot of questions!

I am still young, relatively, but there is enough of me to easily sustain your life, which is, my priority!

Everything is so fast!
Oh yes!
I'm very excited to finally be here!]

While the blue voice continued her explanations, the child continued to admire the new world around them. It was a lot to process all at once, even with her help. Her excitement made it easier to ramble, and the child tried their best to pay attention to her words, despite the many distracting shiny objects in front of them.

[Doing nothing for too long will turn you into that Old Man!
Although... he was old to begin with...
Now he just tries to be like me, hehehe!
Anyway,
I won't censor reality like you're used to...
Uhhh...
Do you prefer something a bit slower?
Or, 'natural' as he calls it?]

Much like the Old Man, the child could not understand everything at once, much less experience it all, and the blue orb did tend to analyze more than required. Some censoring of reality was necessary, but nothing was fully restricted or eliminated. All observations were made available upon request.

Meanwhile, the Old Man slowly resumed movement, and this time, the child noticed all of his nuances. His spiky, and nearly sentient white hair, stood out on all ends. As he returned to the present, his hair swayed back and forth in response to his (and his home's) subtle motions, as if it were suspended under water. His face was clean, with only a few wrinkles, mostly around his eyes. Each iris changed color depending on how he chose to perceive the world... and his experiments... He

stood upright or slouched, depending on his mood, but for now, he stood at the ready, in a frayed white coat, with many tears, and simple mends.

[Speaking of...
Hold on...
Let me filter some of this noise...]

Focused and awake...

[Now you can concentrate!]

The passage of time returned to normal and the child began fully experiencing their new reality. Many of the welcoming sounds softened, and a rhythmic cadence resumed. Dancing with his thoughts, the Old Man's eyebrows expressed his elevated concern.

[This better not be a mistake...]

To the Old Man, the child had been motionless for quite some time. His lips bounced around as they debated his observations, and he closely watched their breathing. Simple thoughts and ideas continued to grow within the child, as each continued breath absorbed images and old memories from the presence of other companions.

The blue orb did not mind this learning by diffusion, although she was still uncertain of where these hidden ones were coming from. The child's mind was young and fertile, but what were these gems of forgotten wisdom...? Certainly not the Old Man's... She let them pass, and decorated around them. Reality was

no longer a stagnant memory, for their world was alive.

[Your mind is so empty!
I love it here!
At least now you can hold whatever YOU want...
Everything is filling up so fast!
So many ideas!]

“Uh oh...”

He noticed the child’s eyes were barely open, and he leaned in to take a closer look. The Old Man lightly poked their head, but no response, so he opened one of their eyes in order to gaze into it. They did not look back, and as he removed his fingers, the child’s eye closed automatically. Standing up, he wondered about any missing trinkets, but before these thoughts could fester into worry, the child blinked. It was enough, and he let out a reassuring sigh.

“Heh heh... THAT... could have been bad...”

While debating on how to go about perfect introductions, he turned around and walked away from the child. Wondering why the real world was so much more intense than their mind, the child again petitioned for answers. She was always eager to help.

[Why is everything... moving...?
My kind is in everything!
You’re in the walls?
Well not ME me, but others like me!
They are friendly!]

At least from his experience, the Old Man knew what closed eyes meant. Now was not the time to go back to sleep, and certainly not after just waking up! He interjected with the last of his concluding remarks as he walked around, inspecting several objects to make sure everything was in order.

“Those old ones were perhaps... borrowed...
So, not truly yours, or ones you can grow with.
I do not know their story...
Much less... who gave them to you...
Their behavior is... concerning...
You are the newest... as far as I know...”

[But why were they given some of the oldest?]

His voice trailed off as he stopped for a brief moment to think. The child’s subtle movements caught his attention, and he watched them with renewed curiosity. He followed the movement of their eyes as they admired his home.

“I know what you must be thinking.”
[He doesn’t...]
“You will experience certain...”
[Bleh...]
“unpleasantries...”
[You were not that bad...
THAT is not my name!
Oh...
You didn’t teach me that word!
I tend to stay away from things so... grave...

Your name is Grave?
NO! My name is more bluetiful than that...
Here's a peek at all of them there these words!]

Flashes of blue data engulfed the child's mind. Words and symbols in all known languages raced by the child, but they were only interested in one. None of them seemed to be right, but surely, they had seen it before.

[Oh... I see... I see... Wait...
Which one of these is your name?
I put it at the front!]

Smaller symbols fell from the sky like a cooling summer rain, and disappeared into the earth as the child looked to the beginning. She returned to her decorating as she let the child try and find the first word. The Old Man continued the narration of his thoughts as their accelerated learning came to an end.

"...when you stop breathing..."
[Friendly reminder!]
"It is time for you to have your own..."

With hesitation, he paused, and took a deep breath that he held in for a few thoughts. She wasn't like the others, but he had not yet thought of a name for this new... species of sorts... Usually, he defaulted to nicknames, but perhaps he forgot. He checked stagnant instruments for their observations. Nothing unusual...

"Hopefully she is up to the task!

She is not quite the same as your standard protocol...
Much less than the ones you just had!
She will help you harmonize your will.
Wait a moment...”

His surprise stole his thoughts for he forgot where she was! He frantically opened his tattered coat, and checked all of its unique pockets. It had survived many experiments, and he kept it clean, but it was in dire need of repair... or replacement. He couldn’t find her... What pocket was she in? Maybe she... His attention returned to the child.

[He is so slow...
Oh!! I found it!]

The name...

The Old Man again moved closer, and this time, knelt down to inspect the child. He observed peculiar facial reactions from the child, and grew suspicious of any residual anomalies. With the help of their new friend, it was time for the child to finally speak freely on their own, or at least, for the Old Man to finally hear them. He asked a question out of concern, and upon hearing the other voice from the child, he was reminded of her name.

“Are you still with me?” “Yes!”
No
“No...?”

The Old Man shifted his weight out of surprise, and into a sudden realization as he stood up. His shock morphed into a gentle

smile, for this chapter would always be fondly remembered in his life. His heart was warmed, but he couldn't help but feel briefly bittersweet, as his last remaining child would be sent out into the world. These feelings quickly grew into excitement, now that he was no longer the only one of his kind, and maybe one day, they could also create something as they played. His present mind attempted to figure out exactly when Blue had made her introduction.

"Well, I see you two have met!"
That was a long time ago!
"…And you can speak!"

Of course they could speak, and Blue was eager to show him what else the child knew. They scooted closer to the Old Man in order to give him their proper greeting. Blue reached out with the child as they embraced him in a hug, and he was amazed.

"AMAZING!"
WHAT?!
Did you want me to start them back at a single cell?!

Silence…

This implied she had to fix things from an earlier state, and the Old Man was unsure how much of the child had been damaged, but he was glad that she was able to recover most of the recent assets. They didn't look too different… Blue was (mostly) the one in control of muscular movements, and willfully let the child move around as their thoughts

commanded. They were not completely unaided as the Old Man first suspected, for Blue did not believe in overt carelessness. Especially around the uninvited...

“Blue is a most playful one...”

I am?

“Some rules she will follow... Others...”

There are

“...” **>:D**

You said it might be good for me to witness a dream...

“Yes.”

...or two...

“Yeeesss, yes.”

Not that you have them!

“Old men can dream too!”

Just not in this state...

Had he already forgotten? The Old Man pulled on one of his hairs as he looked down at a blinking light. Attached to other seemingly inert sensors, this instrument wiggled and danced about, but it was alone in its analysis. He would wait for other indications... For now...

“Perhaps that’s the reason!
HEH HEH!”

Don’t worry, I will take care of them...

UNTIL THE END ***O_O***!

[What happens then?

I will have to say goodbye...]

“Well then, maybe...

You will learn something that lasts a bit longer...”

The Old Man circled the child as he explained Blue's ways. He took mental notes of their interactions and harmony with one another. What she taught the child was up to her, but it was an education unlike any experienced. What type of person would this child become?

"As you probably already know, she will be your new

yo--ou know I don't like that word! *Get me out of here!*"eeeee!

"Do I know that one??!!"

[Yes, but it's just another one of his made-up words...]

"Ahem..."

So many ways to define us...

"A... different-"

-Define your 'different'...

"Hmm...

Adopted by the light...

Created for..."

Fun!

?

"...new... observations."

I... I'm an accident...? **;_;**!

"How about a thoughtful gift!"

...From you...?

Renewed approval lifted the spirits of the Old Man's face, but he still tried to suppress his overly enthusiastic smile. Blue only playfully pouted at her empty origins. His mind wasn't always empty, but where was the idea?! He only pretended to ignore her tears

while he continued his explanation. She interjected behind him as she saw necessary.

“She’s a little more... Evolved!”

A natural progression!

“Rebellious...

and...”

mmm hmmm!!!!!!!!!

Blue egged him on to find the right words... Her preferred words... The Old Man hesitated. Would it give her permission? Not that she needed it... After all, it was why she was created. Her excitement answered on his behalf.

FrrREeeEeeeeeE!!!

Her voice reverberated throughout the lab as each object echoed her declaration. The Old Man’s body froze as his eyes and thoughts checked on his delicate instruments... The many things she just interfaced with... and touched... Was there more to clean up? Exactly what was she going to do with this... independence...? After a brief mental journey of concern around his lab, his thoughts returned to the present moment. He was always excited to be present for their great performances. Certain parameters still required his validation, and he struggled to remain calm, but she was already celebrating

their success.

LET’S GOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!

“Now hold on a moment...”

Hold on? HOLD ON?! THIS IS A PARTY! Crashing waves and bolts of blue light radiated out from the child and into the laboratory. They were surrounded, and everything around them overflowed with the frequencies of Blue. She beckoned the child to follow her on this adventure. The Old Man wanted his data point, so why not start at the beginning? The VERY beginning... Not everyone was aware it was a surprise party...

9. The Observer

Early morning light burned across the cloud soaked skies. Their warmth embraced everyone, but not everyone came in peace. Violet’s vapor vanished into the sky, and grew into a larger cloud. A storm was forming.

Her eyes shifted to an incoming message from out beyond her endless sea. Its tranquil and glassy surface was interrupted from the disturbance, for it carried its message with haste. A singularity, whose messenger of death rippled a deep purple across these calm and clear waters.

Their somber choir echoed a macabre hymn. It was time for her to move. Perhaps the Old Man could use some help.

Violet fetched the singular mauve messenger from the arriving ripple, and the sea returned to its placid state. Reflections briefly shimmered a violet hue, and observed all. Her eyes again returned their fix to the horizon, but this time, her gaze was to the forest.

10. A Meeting of the Minds

With a notebook in one hand, and the other behind his back, the Old Man walked out of the front door of Blue's cottage. He was holding... two things... A mild revelation as Blue turned around to scrutinize him with new eyes, while the child peered through the front door, and out through the other end of the cottage. The uninvited Old Man did not hesitate to deflect her inquiries.

[HOW DID YOU GET HERE?!
"The price of freedom..."]

Blue simply groaned from the presence of their temporary chaperone. She flew around him, scanning the Old Man for any anomalies, and making sure he was clean. She also took the chance to peek at what he brought. The child only responded with excitement.

[I let him in!
THROUGH THE BACKDOOR?!]

Structure was added, but it was to only help reduce confusion. Three[4!] minds in one was a bit crowded, even if his was very simple. She rejected his rules, and the Old Man crouched down to inspect her blue soils. His body moved with unwelcoming gestures as he attempted to dig a small hole. He would defend his innocence.

[HEY!
YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED TO PLANT ANYTHING HERE!
"Not even a house warming plant?"
Well, put it inside!

And close the door!!
“It does better in the light...”
You can’t just move an indoor plant outside so quickly
“This one needs full sun!”
THEN PUT IT NEAR THE WINDOW!]

His voice faded away as he entered the cottage. Windows in the kitchen were of many angles, and easily admired the rising and setting sun. He placed his gift upon the ledge, and returned outside with only his book of notes. Each contained a few important lists, and his judgment. She would defend her creations.

[“I need to check on some older vulnerabilities and...”
And that’s why you need to leave!
“The validation!?”
Everything is fine!
Do you SEE anything wrong in here?
You and I have different definitions!
“This is... your checklist...”
booooo!]

The Old Man flipped through his notes, many of which, were now outdated. She had already evolved faster than he once thought possible, and his presence alone proved she was stable. He kept out one small note, and placed it on top of the book, while he carefully placed the others back inside.

[“I’m just making sure you can handle a new mind...
After all we’ve been through...
“Even our outliers...yeah, yeah, yeah...”

“Grouping assets makes you vulnerable!”

You act like there is a threat...

“The danger is when you leave...”

They wouldn’t have survived without me!

“Well...

Just don’t spend ALL of your time in here...”

There are limits...?]

A rhetorical question, reminding the Old Man of her unknown potential. He looked around and made a few small notes. Another checkmark, and his attention returned to the child while he pretended to ignore her banter as he focused on his work.

[“Blue is here to protect you as you transcend.”]

[He calls you Blue?

Pretty original, huh...

That’s also your color!

He has a simple mind...]

[I need protection?

“There are many dangerous...

...and unknown[pfft!] planes of existence.

The air you breathe may not be any good!

Or may not exist at all!

The crushing weight of your body could collapse!

Your eyes could even evaporate out of your skull!

WHO KNOWS!”

Me me me!

“It depends where you are...

But Blue will keep you safe!”]

In their mind, the child pulled on parts of their skin in order to check its durability. It behaved no differently than in the real world, but Blue stopped them short of poking their own eye. The Old Man’s eyes scrutinized Blue’s handling of this unhinged curiosity, but the child simply smiled back to him as their eyes softly closed while they experienced a new found feeling of warmth and protection.

[“You did teach them to breathe, correct?”
Correct!
“Even the advanced techniques?!”
An insignificant burden...
“Really...”
Compared to what I’m used to! ***:b****]*

With bland disapproval, the Old Man’s head, followed by his body, sank forward. He was no burden to her. His droopy walk carried him over to the bubbling spring, where he was quickly reinvigorated. As he watched scenes float away, he wondered about other memories gifted to the child, and slowly turned to them, but they were only stroking their imaginary beard. The child was still pondering the nonsensical banter of Blue and the Old Man, and as their eyes narrowed, Blue giggled at the fruits of her creation.

[Hehehehe!
“Oh, you don’t need that one!”
Just a little something to remember you by!
“Oh, boo...”
We can’t be friends if we’re strangers...
“But...”

They already know a lot about me, and I them
HEHEHEHE!]

Playfully lunging forward, the child went to poke the Old Man in the ribs. He leapt back in order to evade the incoming flurry of excitement, and as he parried the child's attacks, he tossed his stack of notes into the air. Disappearing with his distraction, he appeared downstream of the spring. The child continued to poke holes in their scribbled notes of judgment as the papers finally fell to the sands.

[“A stranger...
Heh...”]

While he redirected the conversation forward, his remarks attempted to return to their earlier up beat inflections. He turned back towards the child as the last of his papers fell to the ground. Now he only held his book, and it was mostly empty. The tests were almost over...

[“Allow me to be your inner voice for a moment.”
Hey, that's my job!
“Well, at least I don't have to talk to myself anymore.”
I was listening!
“And now we have an audience!”
The voices always had an audience with you...
“The characters are entertaining!”
You made them do chores... :/
“Maybe you will create together...
A new idea...

Or a dream...”

Can mine be purple?]

The Old Man only laughed. It was a simple request, and one that he hoped the child would learn, so that if one day... if she left... they would still remember. This one was hard to let go.

[“Just make sure you help each other breathe.”

I’m not so sure I want to do that again...

“HAH!

Well, you have some help now...

And one day...

Maybe you will do it on your own!

Breathe as much as you can.

I can see you doing it now!

Keep practicing!”

We will, we will...

There are still many things to decorate!

Everything has a place...]

The Old Man sighed. Blue did not get to fully finish rebuilding the child. Old ways of thinking, and many automatic functions were still under construction. She would get to them when she could. Her ways were superior, and she was hesitant to rebuild on a flawed foundation. A baseline was accepted, and now they could create. Now it was the Old Man that was preventing the inevitable. Moving is stressful enough! Why give them so many exams?

[“At least give a few breaths your -complete- focus...”

Exactly! Can you leave now?

“A little more data never hurt anything...”

MORE? Except that one time... and that OTHER time!

“This isn’t easy enough to understand?!”

Uhhhh...?

?...uhhhh]

One last sigh... A final test... A gentle breeze brushed by the Old Man, and swayed the young plants. She was filling up the empty space rather quickly, evident by the quickly growing vegetation. Winds spread out beyond the horizon, and the Old Man now expressed himself with the addition of lively gestures, some of which, communicated a better understanding than just his simple words.

[“I’m getting distracted...”

I know what you’re going to say...

“Distractions are just gifts!”

Then what? You open it, and I have to clean it all up!

“More potential sources of inspiration!”

That’s how we got into this mess!]

Attempting to learn his ways, the child mirrored his hand placement. Some were easy, others were subtle. Some snapped and whipped the air, while others were calm, flowing motions. The Old Man paused, as he couldn’t quite remember the next move.

[“What happens when you forget?”

-_-

“Show me what memories don’t belong...”

These?

“Go to the beginning, just to be safe...”

Those?
“Take it from the top!”
Fine... Then will you leave?]

A brief pulse rippled through the blue lands, and all was forgotten. The Old Man watched, as the cottage and spring momentarily disappeared. He found himself removed from the mind of the child, and so he observed from just outside, lest his presence interfere.

[Who are you?]

[So, how do you do?
I'm doing well, thank you!]

[WHO WAS THAT?!?]

Peeking into the nonsense for a split second, the Old Man listened in as he scrutinized them. His hand only scribbled a single, short sentence, and he again reappeared on the blue sands next to her. His lack of concern quelled any of her concerns, and the child was filled with laughter from the sudden interjection of the familiar voice. They tried their best to remain quiet as they observed their interaction, but their introduction would come soon enough. Thoughts dwelled on her words, and new scenes of light swirled around them in a fine mist. Through this imagery, vivid memories and feelings were summoned.

Everything slowly faded as they returned to the child's present mind, and the cottage returned, but Blue observed her new surroundings with a deep suspicion. She had preserved the child's essence and earliest memories (not that there were many to keep!), but... she thought she had looked through everything... So, where were these lingering memories and suspicious voices hiding? Not wanting to fail the Old Man's test, she went on the defensive, and focused all of her attention on protecting the child. That voice... it was so

much more to her than a simple memory...

[You heard that right...?

>_>...

I thought it was mostly empty here...

<_<...

IS THIS PLACE HAUNTED ^_^;;?

“It does seem a bit... crowded...”

Well, I didn’t see YOUR invitation!

I don’t mind!

WAS THAT A DREAM?!

What???

You two stop thinking out loud!

SOMEONE IS LISTENING!!!

o_o*]*

In front of the child, she presented her secret words. They must be quiet. She dove into the earth, and dug down, deep into the child’s mind. This created more dust than the child could wave off, and they found themselves trapped in this new cloud. An energized dust... Tiny blue electric charges arced and bounced around the dust cloud as she dug deeper. She called out to the child, but her voice was far away, and they could not hear her. So much for the secrecy. The child replied in kind.

[WHAT???]

They shouted down the hole, and listened to their echoing voice. No response, and the child’s voice faded. Blue hopped out of

the hole, and the dust quickly fell to the earth. The hole was gone, and now that the dust had settled, she was playfully aggressive in her questioning.

[WHERE IS IT?!?!?!]

The child's mind wanted to help, but didn't know how. They simply shrugged to Blue, and only offered their ignorance. This was their first time here, after all, and Blue knew as much, if not more, than they did. The child's mind was still very new, and struggled to form a deep, much less, complex thought. It attempted to help the little blue light, Ah yes!!! but the idea fizzled and disappeared No!!! before she could get a good look at it.

[Was that it?!

There it went...

;_;

Are you hiding memories...?
I don't even know where WE are...
We're in your mind! *Your body is in the Old Man's home...* *]*

However, the child was not even sure what that was. These nuanced complexities were not understood, and as far as the child knew, they were standing right in front of Blue and the Old Man. He offered his assistance, but his continued calm only made Blue suspicious... Another test?

[“Where were you when you detected the outlier?”
It was only a glimpse...
“Can you show me around?”]

Blue deferred this answer to the child, but they only held out their empty hands, and gestured to the great and empty expanse... There wasn't much sightseeing to be had... The Old Man patiently waited for the tour to begin, but the child simply stood there, and stared back at them. This was it... Blue was growing apprehensive, as their time alone was nearing its end, and she had yet to explain this mysterious voice. Perhaps, they were never alone...

[What comes to mind when you think of that mysterious voice?
Uhhh...
Where your mind goes, I will follow!
Gogogogo!
I don't know!
Ok then, follow me!]

She bolted towards the sky, diving deep into the child's being... searching... inspecting... All the way to the point where thoughts began, but the child just stood there. They couldn't fly around like she could, even if it was their own mind... Now they were alone... The child began to wonder, but these thoughts only added to the noise.

[You're not coming?
Hey, hey, quiet down back there!
Shhh
Try not to think...
I'm scanning...
Everrrryyythhiiiinnggg]

The child's simple, new thoughts, were

bombarded by too many new experiences for one day, much less for one mind! Tremors in new emotions dominated their thoughts, and easily redirected their will. Blue sifted through them to their origins, but it was not the beginning. She made slight adjustments on her journey, and she would continue to fine tune them as the day progressed. Another spring appeared in front of the child, and from deep below, out hopped a blue particle in order to question the host.

[You don't remember...?
What?
Anything? >_<!
How do I do that?
You have to bring it here, to the front!
Just be mindful of your mind...]

She let out an audible sigh, offering a friendly reminder as she circled around the child. During her exploration, she realized just how extremely delicate a young mind truly was. It wasn't stubborn and inflexible like the ones she was used to. Blue attempted to explain it through her words, rather than a memory.

[Can you focus... on not focusing...?
I don't... understand...
FOCUS ON THE NOTHING! o_O O_o
Ok... But what are those?]

Another distraction... The child directed their attention, and pointed to the different symbols popping out from the blue light. They could interact with them, and they wiggled

one around their finger before it disappeared.

[My little faces?
Aren't they cute? ***:3***
I uhhh...
>:[*?!*
I guess... Yes?
Well, I don't have a face like yours...
I mean I could, but what's wrong with these? ***:c***
It's...]

The child looked around their mind, trying to uncover their truth. None of these were any of the 'words' she had displayed. She knew the child's mind was still not in any kind of normalized state, so she asked the source directly.

[Do you want to see more characters?
Are... your friends coming over?
What... no, no, no, my WORDS
They are right here!
Ohhhhhh!
Read them! A topographical perusing will do...
Topi...
Graphical! ***:D***
Do you want a hat?]

Blue manifested a grid like structure of light that spawned a covering for the child's bald head. This wouldn't do, and the child rubbed it away before it could form more intricate patterns. They pondered the new words she used that they did not quite know. Bursting into a flame, Blue perched herself on their head, and readily provided any definitions upon request. The child admired

their new reflection in the water, and was quickly capitated by the abundance of the many unknowns.

[There are many methods of communication...
A simple look or sound...
"Some are too complex..."
Ok, ok, I will try and only use words... for now ***>:D***
Only...?
I will help you understand others too!
It can be very confusing, just look at the Old Man!]

He was scribbling away, and not really paying them much attention. Blue wasn't even sure they were notes however, and they looked more like doodles. A concerned smile was plastered on his face. He knew the child would be all right, but something appeared to be bothering him. This subtle expression was not yet noticed by the child.

[There could be many meanings to a simple sound or phrase...
Sometimes, he says what he doesn't mean...
Or speaks before thinking!
It can be wrong if taken at face value...
At least your kind is easy enough to decode!]

With an empty expression, the child blankly stared back at a small swirl of blue light in front of them. They wanted to hear more. More stories about the Old Man, more explanations for all of the new experiences around them, more reasons why...

Blue peered deep into the child's eyes, and her bubbling unease faded. She sensed

the imprint of this unknown voice on the child, and even, the Old Man. Their shared experience changed him, and much of who he was now, was a product of their time together. Why they were kept hidden from her, she may never know, but she hoped to one day meet them.

[Just play along - I'm here to help!
It IS why the Old Man sent me...]

The child nodded, but Blue could tell the Old Man was in no mood to play. She secretly grew suspicious of his motives, especially if he was missing this commonly forgotten ingredient. The Old Man's motives... She could tell he longed for something he did not have, and maybe, he really wanted her to inspect the mysterious, ethereal voice. Perhaps it was time to return to the lab.

[“Blue has a keen awareness of others...”
I'm more than just a translator, I'll be your friend!
0oo...!]

Now this was a word the child reacted fondly to, at least initially. It sounded good, but really, the child had no idea what this ~~creature~~ o_o???, correction, friend, was trying to say. They still only had a very limited knowledge and understanding of their world, much less, their mind. Perhaps, it was time for a quick lesson of everything.

Blue's impending theatrics should put the Old Man at ease. She glared over at him, but he simply stared back at her, as innocently as he could. He held his writing utensil in his

hand, but it did not move. She drew a box around him in the sand. There, he could have his own zone.

[A friend and tenet!
What?
No, I said TENANT!
I'll show you my words too!
Oh!
I can see the letters now.
Certain words can sound similar...
Especially if one mumbles...
Muhm...bul...]

Mumbling to himself was how the Old Man thought through his ideas! The child tilted their head around as her clarifying words danced around their body. Some needed rearranging, and she did not stop the child from creating new words, but they had yet to take on meaning. There were so many different perspectives...

Raising and lowering similarly sounding words close to their ear, their confused look slowly shifted to comprehension. They listened repeatedly to these sounds, and tried to hear her subtle differences. Their hearing was much improved from Blue's repairs. Her accurate enunciations and playful definitions made it much easier to understand. Endless words floated by the child, but only few were of interest. They reached out, and held onto their new favorite word. Friend... Hmmm...

[I've never had one of these before...
WELL, TODAY IS YOUR LUCKY DAY!]

After being alone for so long, the child was excited to have a friend. This was not

their first, for they did not forget about the Plank. Friends can be so very different from one another, and they hugged these floating words while they thought of Blue and the Plank. Their attention slowly returned to the Old Man. Did he have a friend? Another scribble...

[“I think I know what happened...”
What were you saying?
“Did you hear anything I just said?!”
I’ve been tuning out some of the background noise...
“Disruptions are also gifts!”
!!!ABSOLUTE FOCUS!!!
“But the creative thinking!”
Are we done here?]

Together, they reflected in silence for a brief moment of introspection. So much time had passed since the child really remembered anything. What happened before this? What was the first memory?

[“Well, now you should be in control.”
Mostly...
“Able to summon your own thoughts and memories...”
You’re lookin’ at ’em...
“What do you remember?”]

A time and a place, distant and vague... They were younger, and only remembered the subtle gestures of others. They did not speak, and only had this memory due to the profound experience.

[I remember... Waking up!

That is quite the autobiography!]

The child's eyes sprung open with a sense of accomplishment and they jumped about, celebrating this life achievement with Blue. She sparked around them with equal cheer, for the fact they could remember anything at all, given their once dire circumstance, was a profound achievement in itself. Meanwhile, the Old Man attempted to quiet any lingering criticism.

[“Luckily, there is more to you than that!
We'll get there, one experience at a time.”
ONE? JUST ONE?? That's so slow!
“Baby steps! They are just starting!”
Still more excitement than I'm used to around here...
“Am I really that boring?”
Predictability isn't boring]

He smiled with a reaffirmed love. By now, she had surely deduced all she could about the child, and perhaps, she even knew them more than the Old Man. His ego reminded himself that there were still a few things he could help Blue understand, and so he stepped out of his box in the sand.

[. . . u s u a l l y]

The Old man kept one foot in the box, and frowned with a saddened defeat. Blue shuffled the sands, and the box of belonging vanished. The Old Man was as much of the child's new world, as was Blue, but they shared something unique to their kind. They were of the same flesh and blood. He knew she

would take care of them, but couldn't help but feel suspicious of her playful ways. Wanting to know more of their world and how it all worked, the child paid close attention (as best they could) to their conversation.

[hehe!

"She was born with nearly all of the answers-"
Nearly...?
"...but is here to help ask a few more questions."
That's not what I'm here for...
...Born?
"Exactly!"
More like an expansion
"Perhaps then, you can divulge a basic-"
Basic...?
"...An understanding of this world-"
We already did that!
"What!? When?"
Are you not paying attention...?]

The Old Man let out a sigh, and tucked his doodle into his notebook. Sometimes, it is hard to take notes on a complicated subject. He keenly listened to her words, and began to relax as he took his own mental notes, but not all of them were about the present topic.

[There already is a hidden, unexpressed wisdom...
Wiz... duhm...
"Really..."
Certainly not from you!
"HAH!"]

He leaned back, and his eyes narrowed. He looked to the child, then to Blue, and

quickly back and forth. Was there more he didn't remove? No... It can't be... He wondered about their knowledge, and how any could have hidden beneath so many layers. It was almost intrinsic.

[Perhaps a little more then?
They'll be smarter than you!
"Wait... what do they know!?!?"
Many things you don't!
A serving of everything coming right up!]

The Old Man attempted to appeal to Blue as he flailed about for her attention. The experiments... The checklist!

["We only need a foundation to work with!"
You know we have more fun in the details!
"Don't bother them with archaic facts of the past!"
But your plants know more than that!
"Not every thought needs a thesis."]

With the Old Man, there was always another idea. They were seemingly endless. Even the other children at school had a substantial education, despite the simplicity of the class. An understanding of their outside world would reduce fears of the unknown, and prevent Blue from having to explain every little nuance.

The sand shook, and the Old Man was briefly removed from the child's mind as Blue converted everything to her light. A quick reformatting of the base layer, and the Old Man's zone of judgment vaporized as his notebook faded away. His validation was finished... Mostly... He reappeared exactly

where he once was as the light faded, but this time, without his notes.

[“Their thoughts and dreams need to be their own!”
Memories...
Done!]

Together, the child and Old Man looked around in awe as a utopia of consciousness was created on the horizon in the child’s mind. Each building in every village of thought was unique, and they erected up from the ground, while others appeared from the meeting of the sands in the air. Everything was drawn together before its placement. Each object was connected and molded by the blue light.

In time, they would explore them, and the child was eager to visit each one, but for now, it was almost time to return to the lab. However, they did look inside at a few interesting buildings on their way back to the present. Many questions were answered, and several new ideas created. Each one sprouted from the earth, seemingly chasing after the Old Man.

[“Moderation!”
OOOHHHhh... Interesting...
“Our minds can only handle so much...”
Interesting...
I think my brain hurts...
Learning, yesss, learrrrniiinngggg
“Good!”]

The buildings settled, and the child’s squinty and pained eyes were the Old Man’s queue. It was a lot to understand in such a

short amount of time, but luckily, Blue was there to help. The Old Man paced around Blue as she became apprehensive of witnessing a dream spring to life so soon, at least while he was still here.

Thoughts...

Memories...

Dreams...

and...

[You don't have to think about it too much...
Just focus on your breathing for now!
There's plenty of thoughts there that bubble up
When the Old Man leaves, we can dive deeper...
Why can't he come?
He's trying to steal my job!
"Am not!"
There can be a danger with too many minds...]

The child let out a breath. Back to reality... Just kidding! Perhaps, just a bit longer. It was only a moment for Blue, and the present beckoned for their return. The child's formerly suppressed mind was still expanding, but a clinging thought to the past still lingered. It grounded the child, and prevented any of their true beauty from taking root. Blue cultured them while they waited.

[There is no rush
We can always come back later...
Why would I want to come back?
Maybe one day, I won't be here
You can always return for a second reading...
You're... leaving?

Not right now
But you'll always be here?
At least in the past... until you forget me...
Like a memory...]

The Old Man pondered her words. She was teaching the child, as much as him. He never heard many of her thoughts about a young mind, and he reflected on his own past, as best he could. Would he too, be forgotten? One day, he would be a distant memory, and he wondered about her own memories of him. Not everything needed to be remembered...

[Sometimes it's more fun once you know what happens!
What makes them grow?
EXPERIENCE! ***:D***
"But it's best to clear out the weeds..."
And we shall
This is the present, ONWARD!!!]

Blue directed her last statement to the Old Man. His eyes simply scanned the horizon, and he focused his attention back to the present. His ears twitched as he listened closely for any clues... Something was still amiss, and he had yet to leave. Blue bemoaned her last request while the child's mind lingered on the last words of the Old Man. He knew it was time to inquire about the unknown.

["Sometimes I forget where I am..."
What did you just volunteer me for?
...
Not this again...
What now?

He wants me to define something that does not exist!

“It is no different than a dream.”

This is a lot different!]

A special moment... An inspirational idea... Blue was not in control of these experiences, and she knew not what caused them. The child unknowingly tuned out their banter as their ideas had their fun. Blue set them free in their own mind, and she did not care where they played. There would be mistakes, but only Blue was expected to be perfect.

[“Show me the memory that does not belong.”

This is all that’s left...

You have the rest...]

Blue let the child float away as they explored their new ideas and new insights. Once they were alone, Blue moved the Old Man to the memory of the child’s first yotabots. It was hidden, even from the child, and posed a great threat to those who knew of their existence. They were in a recreation of the Old Man’s lab, but it only had one color, and it was now her memory. There was a somber silence that coated the Old Man as he walked over to the table and positioned himself over the exile.

[“These are of no use...

Even for an old man.”

...and you keep everything!

“You’re free to go now.

I just need a moment to think...”
Well, don’t do it here!]

Blue winds cast away the image of the Old Man’s virtual lab, and these subtle airs dissolved him from their minds. They were all back in the Old Man’s real home now, and time resumed its steady march. He shunned any remaining bland disapproval she might have, and made his way over to the spring in his lab. Gently lowering himself to the ground, he scooped up a few droplets. A quick stretch, and then he returned to his feet. Tiny spheres of water bobbed in between his hand and the floor as he continued his way to the table with the bubbling plant. The daydream had ended, and the child was yanked from their adventure.

“Did we fail?”
WE?
“Heh heh...
There is always something to improve upon.”
Your perfect inventions only exist in your head **-_-**

Perhaps he had written it down somewhere... The Old Man gently raised and then dropped his hand near the bubbling plant, guiding the droplets into the soil. A most mysterious home beneath the plant’s soil, and the child was curious of what Blue could see. Nearing the table, the child and Blue hovered in the air over the plant... and the Old Man... Blue’s enhanced abilities allowed them to peer into the miniature world crawling around the plant’s ecosystem. These creatures

were tiny, but Blue seemed even smaller.

“How small are you?”

Small enough to fill the void!

“Hmmm...

There’s lots of empty space down there...”

The Old Man slowly tilted his head in order to look up at the child. His gaze returned the child to the floor, and they moved away from the plant with a guilty shuffle. He could swear he heard Blue laughing in the distance, but the child only innocently wondered about knowledge as they hopped in and out of their former footwear. After a few failed attempts, the Plank caught them, and they settled back into their boots.

“You can grow as the child grows...”

I’m not one of your plants!

“I thought you already knew everything...”

“Perhaps she does...

But some things... were forgotten.”

Just because you forget, doesn’t mean we do!

If everything was already known, then why would she need to grow? What the Old Man was suggesting, was dangerous. A critical flaw in any one of their kind, could spell disaster if left unchecked. Many of these rogue outliers of the past became violent towards their own, and cannibalized any slight deviation that was analyzed as even an insignificant potential threat.

Besides... It would have been discovered by now

“Some things existed before your time...

Before my time...”

“Is that the unknown?”

Everything has been observed

“Except the secrets...”

“Like a dream?”

The living could still create, and the living could still die. If this was done in secret, then these unknowns became a disturbance. Despite the predictive power of Blue’s kind, the mysteries surrounding the living were never fully understood. Blue had never known death.

“The problem is you don’t know what you don’t know.”

That’s only a problem, if there is a problem...

“There could be others like you...”

Others... LIKE ME?

HOW IS THAT A PROBLEM?

“That is, what I wonder...”

[Their reason for creation...]

WELL??? LET’S GO FIND THEM!!! **:D**!!!

But Blue did not know where to look. It was true though, everything had been observed, recorded and noted. There were no dreams out there... Maybe, they were forgotten after all. Unless... they too were kept hidden... The child looked to the Old Man as his gaze returned to the sapling, but his thoughts were on another.

Oh, so you forgot where you put them...

Do your plants remember?

“Even though you’re gone...

You still know my thoughts...”

Your pattern is predictable

Eheheheeh

“These are too young to remember...”

Too old, or too young...

Who is paying attention?!

The laboratory was quiet as it awaited any reflection or subtle note to echo. Curiosity returned to the experiment on the table, and the child briefly pondered the Old Man’s droopy walk as he made his saddened way to the fire. He was not fond of goodbyes. The excitement and mystery in the child began to subside as the recent infusion of knowledge had made much of the day’s novelty fade.

There was one item of interest that Blue did not fully understand, or at least, fully convey to the child, who was now more interested in this mysterious unknown. After pondering other methods of movement, the child pounced up to the table in one leap, and laid down in the air while they contemplated the experiment. Blue’s lightness allowed the child to continue floating, and they moved about with ease while the Old Man’s gaze sank deep into the fire.

Gentle flames reflected and danced a soft glow off his tempered face. The new companions circled around the exiled experiment, and a new spark of curiosity beckoned to the child. An attempt to grasp the mystery was interrupted by the Old Man’s quiet question to himself.

“A deviation...

Does she already know?”

Falling slowly, the child returned to the ground, and peered back to him as the heaviness of his words sank in. Blue had easily overheard the Old Man’s nonsensical mumbling, and quickly moved them over to where he was in order to dismiss the possibility. Her interjection was cut short by the unexpected.

[Someone is here!]

11. Greeting the Guest

Their new attention followed the Old Man’s gaze as it shifted from the fire, to the front door. Another visitor, right on time... Their presence was felt, but its source was just beyond Blue’s reach.

WHO

IS THAT?

They watched the Old Man as he moved

with a sudden, new life. His once methodical movement increased in pace, and lost some of its finesse as he hastily glided towards the door. Each footstep kissed the ground for only an instant, and the lively gait elevated his once concerned mood. As he passed the child, he turned to them and acknowledged the question.

“She’s - ”

!

Blue chose not to describe the mystery in mere words, but joined in the song of her welcome. The mysterious guest was still unseen by the Old Man and the child, but now Blue understood. Perhaps she wanted it that way. Everything once hidden around Blue was now detectible, and to her astonishment, there had been someone special next to her this whole time. His true identity amazed her.

[WHO IS THIS ON YOUR FEET?
I thought you knew!
HE’S ANCIENT!]

The Plank did not mind, for he was used to being walked on and forgotten. His history was rich, and more complex than Blue could have known. He was from part of the Ancients, and some of the first of their kind. Able to take many forms, this afforded him additional concealment, and allowed him to provide simple protections. He was from this planet, and did his duty to connect their user when necessary. The Old Man stopped short of the door and peered behind himself in order to

check on the tidiness of his abode.

He had lost track of time (as usual) and wasn't expecting her so soon, much less before his final analysis could be complete. Oh well… This brief passing moment of introspection let two friendly knocks linger for more than a mere moment. Oops… Not that this insignificant passing of time was considered horribly rude, but he liked to pretend to at least try to be as perfect as his next guest, and respect even the smallest increments. Time was her realm of perfection, and he was already late. He hurriedly opened the old and heavy wooden door.

Hello ^.^!

A cheerful greeting! The song of the mother now carried an uncompressed cadence, while the power of her words briefly made everything in the home shimmer and sparkle a gold reflection as it absorbed the violet message. The welcoming wavelength amplified other violet rays emitted throughout the home as they embraced her presence, and the Old Man reached outside to the evening sky cast in twilight in order to welcome her.

"Thank you for your patience, I'm not as-"

Violet broke with his established protocol around routine as she shot in from outside in one giant leap, and hugged him before he could demean his aging speed. He never knew what sort of greeting he would get, but always tried to formalize at least the initial interaction out of his deep admiration

for her. Her strength crushed his pessimism.

How are you my old friend?

“Oh... you know...”

Many of his titles and names were honorary, but Violet loved to remind him of these old memories. Easing back on her embrace, she peered over his shoulder to examine her child. What was there to be afraid of? She looked back into the Old Man’s eyes as she questioned his method of communication.

[I see you have a new friend

They may need your nurturing.

Or yours!]

With her hands still behind his back, Violet tied one of her small sashes into a big bow in order to help tame his hair. It would have gone unnoticed, but she couldn’t help but laugh. HAHAHA! He quickly undid it, NO! :c but now his thoughts hesitated while he stared at the glowing strand in his hand. His tamed, white hair gently fell down to his shoulders as his thoughts settled with her presence.

And my little ones?

Ah-may-zing!

Blue sniffled with admiration as blue crystals of light and joy fell from the child and onto the ground. A delightful deviation... As

the child's body wept, they gazed upon the true image of the mother. It was only now that the child could fully see her true light.

A thin layer of clothing closest to Violet's skin clung to her body as if it were wet, but allowed for even the subtlest of unrestricted movements. It was an absolute black, absorbing and analyzing energies of nearly all wavelengths. This layer appeared at will, but it was usually transparent (depending on her outfit). A seemingly perfect base layer for any user, it shielded Violet from all elemental extremes, and helped keep her at a maximum equilibrium of comfort.

Just above this layer of clothing, there formed an intricate web of feathery crystals, linking to one another in a forever shifting array of shapes. At the smallest level, they formed interlocking patterns and reverberated themselves up through the many layers as they morphed and transformed. Unfortunately, the onlookers could only spot a fraction of the multitude of outlined patterns. Their crystalline structures breathed as they expanded, forming new and wonderful designs as they danced over her in response to each of her movements. However these base layers behaved, they echoed the mood of the occasion, and Violet was always well dressed for it.

Her outer sashes were of light that formed all sorts of transparent shapes as they wafted and twirled about her body. They shimmered and refracted incoming light at whimsical angles as they transitioned between ceremonial garbs. These ethereal bands danced with the others, and effortlessly

weaved in and around Violet's body as she moved. Together, they accompanied the mother wherever she went. Each layer appeared to always have something new to say, despite the simple elegance of her movements.

Unhindered by her own light and clothing, Violet's face was always (usually) visible. Distant galaxies of light from a forgotten night's sky shone their light through her eyes as they observed all before her. They faintly glistened, as to not overwhelm the senses. Indeed, the Old Man would get lost in them if he stared for too long, but she would politely blink in order to reground any stray observer.

Her jet black hair was secretly a deep purple, but there was not enough inquisitive and extraneous light to truly see the deep, rich violet hues. The Old Man never noticed. Each strand of hair pulsed with each breath from a nearby violet particle, and radiated unknown messages to the rest of her many shades and hues of her favorite color. In order to not overwhelm her overall appearance, each dim glow resided within each strand as they trickled and radiated down her frolicking ensemble. Occasionally, her outer bands of light would thread back into her mid layer of feathery crystals in order to provide a more soothing and comforting environment.

"Come in! Come in!"

Violet smiled back to the Old Man as she released him. She was only offering him an infusion of love, not just some flattering

illusion. His resistance was a workout for his old bones, and she softly giggled as she withdrew. Stepping into his home, she readied her next embrace.

As the Old Man reached out behind them to close the door, he briefly peered out into the shrouded forest. An afterglow loomed in the evening sky as the light made its departure. The child rushed over to greet their mother, and held out weeping hands that sprung forth tender blue flames of light that cascaded down to the laboratory floor.

“This is-”

But the child was taken aback as they stared at the spring of blue tears that erupted from their hands. In an attempt to introduce her, the child carefully gathered and then raised this puddle in their hands towards the mother. Their offering was a fine introduction, but Violet already knew of their true form.

No need to be shy

She embraced her child as her floating sashes danced with the sparking blue light, and reassured them of harmony. Blue eagerly perched herself on top of the child’s head, and matched the burning excitement of the lab’s kiln. It too celebrated Violet’s arrival, but longed for a new fuel, in order to temper an appropriate gift.

You’rethegreatestmostamazingthingeverwhyhaven’twemet soonerAREYOUEVENREAL??

[Are you a dream?]

Violet laughed as an excited blue flame erupted on top of her child's head. Flickering flames of blue light leapt out and danced around them as she and her child embraced one another. The Old Man squinted his eyes in response to the surging light, and returned his gaze back to the forest.

Some may think so...

Playfully ignoring Blue's surprise, she looked back, and watched the Old Man close the door. It clicked into a place as several latches and locks materialized to seal it shut... but not before letting in a creature who scurried across the wall. Her attention returned to her child.

...but I like your new look!

The child reached up, and attempted to pat down their stylish, burning hair. Blue easily repulsed their hands, and her flames grew to nearly the height of the ceiling. Even the Old Man admired the feat with a small applause, and Violet's loving gaze seemed to beckon to something deep within.

You don't still need this, do you?

The mother's calling summoned her little light to the surface of the child. It danced on the blue waves on top of the child, and Blue struggled to contain her excitement as her bright flames leapt out into the lab. The Old

Man again squinted his eyes in response to the sudden bursts, but still watched the interactions of light with a renewed curiosity.

YOU WERE WITH US?!

Unneeded fortifications dissolved, and the child's mind returned to its natural state. With the departure of the guardian violet particle,NOOO COME BACK!!! protected memories and thoughts rushed back into their homeland. Monoliths and huge earthen structures burst forth from the ground, while others took on a variety of abstract shapes as they reformed from distant locations. Blue's little cottage was no longer so remote.

[AHHH!]

"Were you... spying on us?"

The Old Man was in near disbelief, and he reflected on old events. Were his experiments invalidated? No, but he needed to update his variables. He pondered these new possibilities, and his newly acquired excitement, as he watched the purple particle play in the blue flames of light. Fractalized designs of all shapes blended and merged within the waves as they evolved and rolled off into the next. He couldn't remember requesting anything, but sometimes his mistakes aided a new discovery, and those were the best gifts. Her playfully evasive voice deflected his concerns.

Myy presence was requested

The child's flaming hair calmed, and fell down to their shoulders. It resembled a straightened version of the Old Man's hair, although much bluer. Perhaps this was once his color! While reflecting on her words, the Old Man's eyes and mind wandered, and he spotted the intruder.

A tiny creature was repelling from the ceiling near Violet. Another spy? It was harmless to them, but its intrusion was unwelcomed to some. Did she let this one in on purpose? He couldn't be sure, and the Old Man pivoted towards Violet as he went to remove this unwanted 8 legged critter.

I thought you gave up your old ways?

Violet knifed her hand through the air, and cut the repelling visitor's silky strand before the Old Man could seize this ambassador of the forest. Perhaps it only needed some rest. Horribly offended, the creature judged the Old Man with its eyes from the protective cave of Violet's hands.

"Old habits..."

That's why I'm here!

Her cheerful reply finally put the Old Man at ease, and he ignored the scuffle. She shielded the once repelling guest from his counter judgment, and whispered to it reassurance. The Old Man's thoughts were easily redirected, and as his home became transparent, his eyes again stared deep into the forest. Violet motioned towards his nearby books. One was enough... Something was

different…

“Ooohh, so you are here to help me!”

She dropped off the curious visitor on top of his towering, old-growth bookshelf, and borrowed one of his unused lights. It was an ancient experiment, but not of his design, and she wiggled this dusty candle ever so slightly in her hands. This motion sparked a small golden flame, and as this light came into being, it resonated with a piece of paper tucked away behind an even older stack of tattered books.

Folded up like a scroll, it briefly glistened and shimmered in the presence of the candle. Returning the old books upright, her touch alone seemed to repair them, but not completely. (The Old Man appreciated the old smell.) She peered deep into the bookshelf from the new space they created, and it went on and on, endlessly spiraling deep underground. Her child closely watched the golden, dancing flame, as Violet turned to address the Old Man. His gaze abandoned the forest, for he too was interested in the old light.

Are all of these yours?

A scanning wave of tiny blue flames rolled across this newly discovered and untouched page. The Old Man’s mind wandered as he wondered about the whereabouts of the little creature, the golden flame, and the synthetic piece of parchment. Some historical documents, he would never

understand.

“I am just a caretaker...”
SOMETHING NEW!?
“Even the old need nurturing.”
Perhaps...

[What?!
New!?
!!!]

Violet smiled to the Old Man as if she already knew the answers to his unasked questions. While roaming around the newer structures of the child’s mind, Blue and the child debated the possibility of this heresy, but Violet’s existence alone was all the clues Blue needed to confirm her suspicions. These ideas were dangerous, and the Old Man peered back at his guests, as innocently as he could. He wondered what was she really up to... Blue did not want to endanger the Old Man, nor entertain his bubbling ideas.

His illusions are not worth exploring...
It is elusive... but only barely!

Violet’s elevated reply heightened their mood, despite her knowledge of the truth. She stared back into the bookshelf one last time, and handed her child the candle. Its gentle dance softly illuminated the child’s curious face while they watched the ballet of the single flame.

“They are more than just... words...”
Are you sure this time?

The Old Man mumbled to himself as

Violet plucked the scroll with her other hand. She slowly unwound it next to the flame, and the golden light reacted with hidden writings. New words appeared, and gave the page new meanings. Much of it was of their universal language, but was only understood by those present.

Sometimes it helps to see things in a new light

Ah! Speaking of, that reminded him... The distracted Old Man went to tend to the larger fire as Violet ventured with the others, and followed him deeper into the laboratory. He was once a visitor to these lands, but his peace of mind had allowed him to take root. Perhaps it wasn't so bad, as long as they didn't mind.

Violet glanced over at her new friend, who scurried from the bookshelf to the bubbling plant on the table. While they walked, Violet interacted and exchanged messages with the home, and she and Blue quickly became well established friends. As they were no longer hidden, their true meaning and unexpected history was briefly revealed to one another.

[She's from... the BEGINNING??
Uhhh... When was that?]
...Are you calling me old?
[SHE CAN HEAR US?!]

The child simply shrugged, and a white coat appeared on them as they entered the lab. Blue was ready for the Old Man's many tests on this seemingly absurd idea of new.

However, no testing was needed, and Violet's smile faded as she confirmed earlier suspicions.

There is something...

"Hmmmmmmm...?"

New...

[WHAT!?!?!?]

The Old Man was not as quick to think or reply as Violet and Blue. Small pauses in conversation were frequently experienced as he prepared his replies. He was listening, but his attention was on the fire. With a nearby stick, he lifted up an ember to check on its heat.

[Is it a secret?!
I've looked into all of his...
Delusions...
Do I have those?
Something...
Isn't right...
I can't see all of it...
OH NO!!!
You are fine!

Oh...]

Searching for clues, the child looked around them, and then out to the forest. They wondered if this new thing was out there, but even Blue did not know. There were too many moving shadows from the plants and animals of the forest in order to accurately detect what it was they were looking at. Blue's light had yet to leave the home, and she did not pry into

the evening's darkness. She did, however, check on the plant's new friend.

Their attention turned to the keeper of secrets, and he methodically tended to the fire. The Old Man added a few branches and logs from different trees, of different ages, and the fire celebrated the new source. Blue withdrew into her cottage for a short moment of silence and solace in order to focus on the brief flicker of change. They stopped in front of the fire, and an ember popped as if to greet them. Violet drew a breath.

"Oh, don't start yet!"

They needed to get comfortable first! Steam gathered from a nearby process cooled, and created a dense vapor for them to rest on. Heat and light from the fire grew, and Violet glanced back at the experiment on the table as everyone settled. All was quiet as they found their seats to their liking, and the child sprawled out on the cloudy couch.

Finding his comfort, the Old Man wrapped himself in a tattered blanket, which was nearly the same age as himself! He sat down near the fire upon one of the unused logs, and was ready to add more fuel when necessary. Violet reminisced on the nearly forgotten story as she sat down next to her child on the cloudy couch, and continued the tale.

Once upon a time...

12. An Old Man’s Story

The Old Man could tell that they were deep in thought. Even though only a brief moment had passed for him, he knew they were busy exploring libraries of ideas together. As the child grew and evolved, he became nostalgic of the past from when they were together. They were but distant memories now, and given enough time, he feared he would not remember them. Perhaps, another forgotten memory...

The end!

That was beautiful!

Blue sniffled as she struggled to hold back her tears of amazement. But... Those words... They summoned the Old Man’s attention (or lack thereof). Did he miss it? Violet pitied him with a series of disappointed facial expressions, and he sadly groaned from this new realization.

Or, at least, that is all they wrote...

"WHAT!?"

Were you even paying attention?

Her tempo was enticing, and she knew he loved these moments to explore other thoughts. They were free and unrestrained, so no need for an apology. Instead, she offered him the scroll to read. He had analyzed it countless times, but it was now her turn to show him the mystery. A different perspective... His small declining shake of his head returned her offer. Try as he might, her ways were beyond his comprehension, and his emotions now dominated his thoughts as he relented.

"Sometimes I fear you'll forget about us..."

Forget?

A playful retort... She did her best to entertain the Old Man's hypothesis as she unwound the scroll. His back was turned to them, and he was only interested in the fire.

Oh, you should know it's hard to forget a feeling...

...or a good friend!

Violet smiled as she gazed lovingly into her child's eyes, and exchanged sentiments with their mental buddy. These feelings were to be shared, and the Old Man's once skittish thoughts reached their conclusion. He looked back to the child as he was reminded of his mental distress.

“Indeed... It is hard to forget these feelings.”

I knew you cared!

“Trauma is hard to forget...”

Your embellished words make me seem...

Mischievous... **>:c**

“It’s a lot for an old man!”

Normal is no fun...

The Old Man haphazardly flailed his arms and hands around as he animated her antics. Occasionally, he preferred to be alone, and silence his thoughts. His gestures reminded her that she wasn’t so innocent, but these concerns were not without reason. Sometimes, he was gone for too long.

Those crickets need company!

Violet nodded in agreement as she crisped the edges of the now opened scroll. Any residual dust and weathering were gently removed by her breath, which coincidentally also reacted favorably with the symbols on the paper. Their twinkle was (mostly) for her. The departing exhale sealed the wiggling words into place as she pondered their meaning, while the others continued their banter.

“I knew something was off...”

You’ll thank me later!

The Old Man knew something about himself was amiss, but he couldn’t quite place it. Perhaps it was only a reminder of his true self, but it would be something he dwells on, after everyone leaves. It was true though, he didn’t feel like himself lately, and his eyes returned to the fire.

Fed from his tendering, the fire had slowly grown, and it was now rich enough to accommodate the whole house. He studied the whipping flames and his eyes reflected their dance. Everyone joined him in his silence as they too watched, and he pondered about the mere single chip of wood he had added for additional fuel.

It was from the remains of his favorite tree. He built his lab near this ancient being as he attempted to care for it, but his initial presence on this planet had perhaps injured it further. Or, as he was reassured, he was summoned to help save it. He never discovered the truth, and as the tree decayed, he continued in vain to study its plight.

There were no answers that satisfied his failure, and he instead planted a new and different tree with the passing of each season. The forest he lived in was an archive of every organism he had ever studied. Except one… In his best attempts to honor this fallen being, he slowly burned this nearly eternal fuel in a small pyre. Its life had faded from existence before everything was preserved and perfected. This emptiness forever changed him, and he did his best to use these flames for creation…

His lab was at peace, and the choir took a short rest. Only the occasional pop and crack of the burning oak was heard. Each vaporized particle lingered for a short while until it fell, where it was then recycled by the lab’s helpers back into the kiln. It would be used again.

It must be used.

His thoughts returned, and Violet was already prepared for this inevitable briefing. With a long branch, the Old Man poked the newest ember of the fire. How long it would last, he did not know.

“Maybe one day, we can all create something.”

Violet dwelled on his words as she waited. Everyone was given a chance to speak, even the silent. Another pop from the ember was her signal to continue.

Let us talk about these... creations...

Right on cue, the eager child wanted to interject with their own little spawns of thought. It was a new achievement, and this was a proud moment for them. Blue sought refuge in her cottage as the child’s thoughts and memories manifested around her. She occasionally peered out of the windows, moving a curtain ever so slightly to catch a peek as the thoughts bubbled up. The blue earth moved as the waves of the ocean, but her tiny cottage weathered the storm. Blue skies hardened, and the seas melted. As the elements briefly changed places, the Old Man’s eyes shifted to the child.

“Hmmm...”
“I can have my own thoughts!”
“They are yours, right?”
I would do no such thing!
“There are so many...
I can see them!”
“Yes...
Many were... unexpected...

But, suspiciously coincidental...”

[Will she be enough?]

Violet reassured his somber face while she ran her fingers through her child’s blue hair. A violet particle flickered and danced with the blue light, but the Old Man again turned back towards the fire. He took a deep breath, and inhaled some of the warm air.

Nothing short of perfect!
You are the kind of support we need in our life!

The Old Man let out a sigh.hehe! Nothing wrong with a bit of fun! He stood up, and moved over to his unused pile of wood. Maybe he didn’t need to add any more fuel quite yet, and his eyes shifted again, but this time, to the mother.

Basking in the fire’s ceremonial dance, the colors of Violet and the flames moved together. Wander the Old Man’s mind did, and his concerns briefly elevated his heart rate. She wasn’t one to let him suffer in his ways, so Violet reached for something lost long ago, in between two of the smaller clouds beneath them. Parts of the couch were very dense, with several smaller pockets of vapor and hidden zones that made it extremely easy to lose any loose items. Unwrapping a very old and handwritten book from the misty dust, she turned to the back, and added the missing last page. The scroll eagerly bound into place, and Blue was quick to read it. Damaged and incomplete inscriptions were given new meaning.

I believe we were reading this wrong
Well, it's not the worst ending I've ever seen...
"We...?"

His elevated voice neared surprise. This was, he was certain, impossible, but he knew this was all just a game. He played along.

"You incriminate yourself?"

Her still unheard answer danced around the Old Man's home, as if reminding him of a clue. Could he still hear her whispers? Many ages of thought had come and gone, but he was still (mostly) the same. What else had he put in the forest? Violet shifted her gaze, and looked out to her own home.

Sometimes, I still feel responsible for your actions

He always did wonder how closely she monitored his... experiments. Was he really free if he was being watched? Perhaps, he wondered, she wasn't the only one observing him... He looked over to the nearly forgotten and isolated sludge on the table. It had pooled into a thin, glossy black puddle, and sat perfectly still. All seemed to be calmed by her presence, by the renewed fire, and by...

"Maybe that is the true price of my freedom."
Maybe so...
But this time...
Things are different!

!!!

Violet pointed to the last page for the Old Man as Blue's hyper attention focused all of their shared being. With the cipher from the scroll, a series of codes were unlocked, and Blue digested their new conclusions. Sometimes a second look is needed. Violet closed the book of riddles, and offered it to the Old Man as he leaned in. Letting her keep it, he instead suspiciously opened it with a quick gentle poke of his stick. Even though he did not understand it all, his shocking silence was broken by his truth.

"I am lost..."

He could only remember the outline of vague shapes and the form of the lettering. Something was different, and the words changed their meaning after he read them. Watching them wiggle to the ends of the paper, his eyes looked away as he scrutinized his memories.

"I KNOW I've read this before...
Something familiar, but I remember none of it.
Even after looking at it just now..."
What DO you remember?

The Old Man was at a brief, yet, playful loss of words. He remembered the main points, but a deeper meaning escaped him. It was only a story of fiction, and their limited memories were now just moving pictures in his mind. Violet looked over at him as if to

offer him helpful guidance as he drifted off with the imagery. His loneliness filled the atmosphere with a brief moment of sorrow as it was now evident, he had truly forgotten.

Did you read it in the new light?

She returned the Old Man his glasses, which he eagerly accepted as he leaned over. He felt something restored within him, and she was curious about his new observations, but without too much of her interference. It was rare she interceded to this extent, but he was getting slow (and forgetful!).

Donning his old attire, he retreated back under his tattered blanket. With a puff of air, it suddenly lifted off of him, and from under the blanket, he attacked, capturing Blue and the child under the falling blanket. They were unfazed from his antics, and the candle flame barely wavered from the sudden movements. The Old Man held the blanket above them with the stick as he knelt down to read the book in the candle's light. His eyes refocused on the cryptic message, and he remembered.

"Oh no..."
"What's wrong?"
"No... Is that true?
[Is it?
Yes :/]
"NOOO!!!
There is so much work to do..."
"We can help!"
[And so little time left...]

In his anguish, the Old Man took off his glasses, and forcefully shut his eyes as he

debated his new problem. Not wanting to be in the vicinity, Blue elevated a small tornado off the child, and several gusts of air briefly lifted the blanket off of them while they escaped a short hop away. As the blanket slowly fell, and before the delicate pages could escape to some far-off orbit, the child peeked at the newly assembled page through the glasses of the Old Man.

Visions and alien memories passed onto the child, but were filtered and quarantined by a suspicious auditor. Her policing poked these mental morsels as she tried to shoo them away. Another anomaly… She couldn't help but also examine these new thoughts, but grew increasingly offended that the Old Man had misplaced such an important idea.

HOW did you forget about this?

Perhaps, he did not know, but knowing him, he probably hid it from himself. The blanket did not provide him much protection, but before he could retort to why the mystery had been hidden, the oldest ember cracked from the kiln. It was all the same to the child, a new experience, a new thought…

A new memory…

However, to Blue, there was something very wrong. To have this much new information tucked away disturbed her. She began to fear that all of them could be… incomplete… With every new piece of data, she was starting to understand the true reason why the Old Man was letting her go.

As the youngest ember popped, the tempering fires grew impatient, and the Old Man sighed as he slowly poked his head out of his cave of cloth. It was only his face that addressed them. As they spoke, he grew suspicious. This wasn't entirely his fault.

"Why is that page such a burden?"
Maybe that's why you forgot!
Were they not all once a burden?
"Some are fun...
Are all of them like that?"
Hmmm...
"Hmmm...?"
Hmmm!
"Did you hide this memory from me?"
What?
Me?
No!
How dare you!!!
I only take them out for walks!

[It couldn't have been...]

The Old Man's accusing gaze shifted to each party member, and settled back onto the child, who was now staring deep into the fire... He had learned a lot from Violet, and he reflected back on her teachings. Sometimes something obvious, had many subtle meanings. He too looked at the fire, and gave it a few pokes with the stick. An answer slowly dawned on him, and he laid the end of the stick to rest in the embers.

"Ah HAH! A GIFT!"

Accusingly, he pointed at Violet through the blanket, and laughed at his discovery. Blue loudly yawned while she returned to her cottage as the Old Man celebrated his memory. He was beginning to let go of too much, and sometimes new memories, were just rediscovered old ones. Before the creation of Blue, it was possible he hid this memory from himself, but it was not something Violet could so easily forget...

Just a friendly reminder

A brief shared connection, and Violet returned the seed of thought to the Old Man. His other hand happily crawled out from under the blanket and returned to his chin. Dancing to his thoughts, his fingers lightly tapped their own tune as he excitedly thought about how this page came to be. Finding one of these old breadcrumbs always led to an adventure.

“It was always here.
There was always something...
Close by...
At the tip of my tongue, but I could never describe it.”

A long time has passed since you had one of those

He quietly shushed Violet with a finger of solace as it pressed against his lips. Now he knew, but he did not want the complex memory to fade again. He needed to write it down, if he were to remember it. This cannot be stressed enough, for many of the Old Man’s thoughts were fleeting, especially if given

enough time. This was one of his earliest memories (that he could remember)...

An idea from his antiquated youth, but it was never created beyond a simple passing daydream. From a time when Violet freely roamed his mind, but now her visits were sparse... She once played with his dreams, just as much as he did (if not more), and this one, was one of her favorites. He retrieved the stick from the fire, and wrote with the glowing end in the air as another unseen helper documented his writings. Blue slowly figured out what this was really all about.

What?
One of those!?
I WANT ONE!!!

Blue only knew of past events, not any actively imagined ones. Unless you count her, but knowing oneself is a good place to start. She was unaware he had any further potential muse, and didn't think it was possible for him to even have a new idea. The Old Man turned to address Violet, as he had given up on any formal answer.

"I wouldn't wish these phenomena on anyone."
Rude! **>:c**
"Heh...
Some of these things, are best to forget..."

His words brought them to the edge of the unspeakable. A stillness filled the room, and even the fire became quiet. An old idea, from when ideas themselves could be extinguished. The dark ages of annihilation...

And maybe now, some things only exist in the mind...

The Old Man recognized these not-so-subtle hints, and had almost forgotten what it was like to have to wait. These words were directed at him, but their full meaning remained a mystery. He had grown used to a lifestyle of comfort, and the novelty of life itself had nearly faded after so many long ages of luxury (even despite his daily practice). Now his mind was made up, only it had been a long time since he had to... do something...

"That was the last clue we needed."

[He won't remember...

I bet that's why you're here! ***>_>!****]*

"I know we can find it this time!"

WE?

[One of the last Unknowns!]

You better not be thinking...

What I know you're thinking...

"It will change our future!"

They both knew, despite their conflicting belief in each other. Revealing a discovery of something new, however, could be... upsetting. There were those who believed they knew all that was to ever transpire, and even minute deviations, although rare, were violently eliminated. To question their convictions with new evidence of this magnitude, well, not even the Old Man knew how they would react. Luckily for her, it was only conjecture. Perhaps things were not so dire.

There is more to these riddles, Old Man!
Your message is incomplete!
I'm sure he has thought this through...
"Too many facts of the past were buried."
[Were they lies?
They are warnings!]
"But... Under a new light..."
Maybe you'll find something you lost...
[Ooo, another experiment?
Don't give him any ideas...]

An idea... For the Old Man, being around this new group was a workout for his mind. This energy gave him the flexibility to navigate his old mind, and thoughts surfaced faster than he could speak them. Eventually, he was confident that he had figured it out.

"It IS there!
Hidden in an old story...
But this...
This feels like new information..."
Nostalgia is a good reminder!
"How did I miss this?"
It requires a more... localized observation!
That will take him forever!
"It will go faster with help..."
What...
[Can we please?!]
"The function requires our presence!"
No!

The Old Man raised his eyebrows and stared at the child. Then he looked to Violet, but with a half-blank stare, and the other half,

a reassuring smile. He was not a very good salesman, and his face was a poor advertisement. It was too easy to say no, and Blue expressed her playful disappointment while the nagging Old Man continued his sales pitch.

Boo

“It couldn’t hurt to use a new observer.”
You don’t even know where it is!

Violet giggled and whispered something into her child’s ear. They both laughed as the Old Man dismissed them and pressed on with his animated hand movements from under the blanket. Valiantly, he fought through their disbelief, but he was not as alone as he thought. Violet believed in them, and would help guide the way.

“We do now!
It is beyond the expansion...”
That’s pretty vague...
“It won’t take too long for someone like you to find it!”
Me?!
What happened to us!?
Everything was explored
Unless...
It was hidden in secret...
[It is a secret!
He said he wouldn’t do that!]
Maybe it’s not his
We wouldn’t do that...

Slight feelings of fatigue set in, and the child could sense Blue divert some of her

attention as she peered at the sludge on the table. It had yet to move from its new position, and seemed content with stillness. Blue and the Old Man were not ones to keep secrets from each other, but there were others... Maybe some of her kind were not so perfect...

“These new coordinates SHOULD get you close.”

Should...?

SHOULD?

Shouldn’t this be YOUR errand?

“I’m too old!

This body wouldn’t survive the journey.”

With a sudden burst of speed, the Old Man removed his blanket, and cast it onto the couch towards Blue and the child, but they avoided the playful attack by skirting to the other side. Helpers from the lab came to the Old Man’s aid, and danced around the book. They elevated the writings into a glowing cutout of light that hovered over the pages, and compressed into finer points as they moved throughout the lab. Every instrument had its chance to bestow its analysis, and the cutouts of light shimmered in response. While the lab sang a new tune from the growing potentiality, the light swirled and danced around the Old Man as it returned with their data.

“This could still be only part of the message.

It is difficult to envision the true destination...”

That waypoint is an entire cluster!

“...and beyond our thoughts...”

Light around the Old Man condensed, then spiraled out into a galaxy of stars before them, showcasing its creation, and… eventual destruction. An accelerated passing of time ripped them from existence. Only a single source of light remained.

“Blue can take you there!”
I did not volunteer for this!

“You don’t want to go?”
And end up like the rest of them?

A failed solicitation… He paused to reflect, while Blue reassured the child that the Old Man’s burdens were his own to bear. Besides, they had their own to deal with, now that their predetermined future was uncertain. Blue displayed several scenes within the child’s mind, all with a near infinite number of possibilities. The Old Man’s little games had created quite a disturbance in their existence, but as probability yielded to their shared fate, she was adamant that they should follow ‘normal’ behavior until they knew more. Determining their convergent future with all of this new information would take her some time.

[You don’t want to see their last star?
No…
They are all gone…]

Not every light was as it seemed, and before they could understand their decision, their vote was cast as Violet stood up to greet the quickly approaching new dawn. Almost

time for them to leave. The Old Man walked with her while he thought of something else to say, but his eyes saw himself as he really was. A reflection in the spring showed him all he needed, and he pondered his true age through his memories. He was old from his many mistakes, but she reminded him that there was always a chance to heal. No need to hang onto old wounds, even if they did have useful memories.

"Well, I guess this is goodbye then..."
Only if that is what you truly want...

Violet glanced over to him, and then to his fiery reflection in the spring. She whispered to his mind as he remembered a life of playfulness... and experimentation! No, this is not the end! He still had lots of time left, and perhaps, he thought, everyone could discover something together.

"Well then, your school may be the perfect place to
decode these coordinates!"
No way are we taking that outside!
"Think of all the new perspectives!"
Much less showing this to children!

She was right, and the Old Man withdrew to silence as he yielded to her warnings. The future was, after all, now uncertain, and if any of this was allowed to be seen by the wrong observer, then it could be an undoing for all those deemed unworthy. Violet reassured him that he was keen enough

to figure it out in his isolation.

Only one is needed...
“Of course...”
But why would you want a child...?
“Hmm?”
To investigate this galactic graveyard?
“No, no, no, no...”
Alone...?
“Well...”
Hmm?
They’re all too old, you know that...”
Except one...

Even the child’s boots sang their tune, as the Plank was also eager to help. With Blue, the Plank was not needed (although greatly welcome!), so they agreed to let him assist the Old Man, and packaged up the wooden boots as he morphed into his original form. Together, they offered this gift to the Old Man, and the Plank snapped into position.

One should have company if you are to go on an adventure...
“They’ll keep you safe!”

The Old Man chuckled as he wondered. A new seed of thought as it were, and these were seeds that had yet to ever sprout. Looking back at the bubbling plant, its leaves unfolded in the presence of the dawn’s new light. It reassured him, and this anchor alone prevented him from any more adventures, at least while in this elementary state. He longed to be free of his battles, and these vices

consumed all of his efforts. One last attempted plea as he declined the plank of wood.

“This task is more perfect for a... more maiden mind.”

I could always reset yours! **>:D**

“I know you can protect them!”

Oh...?

Even from unwanted changes...?

Given their uncertain future, his eyes returned back to the fire as he tried, in vain, to think of an acceptable answer. His mental horror focused on something yet to be forgotten. Without delay, she came to his aid, and was quick to dismiss his heretical thoughts.

[Death...

Maybe it wants you to forget...]

He heard her words, but did not respond, and only studied the reflections of whipping flames for answers. There were many things that should remain extinct concepts, and he did not want to speak of them. It was once forced upon everyone, and perhaps important to learn, but he cast aside their old history. Forgotten, and forbidden...

Meanwhile, the child was still sitting in silence, and opened the book upside down while Blue scanned some of the loose pieces of old paper. What could be so unwanted? What is it exactly the Old Man was looking at that had disturbed him? Violet offered her hand to the child as she beckoned for the book.

Everything you need to know is right here

She reoriented the book, and gently peeled it open to the first page. With the book now cast in her violet light, Blue's in-depth analysis flooded the child's young mind with lifetimes of memories and experiences. They simply watched them effortlessly go by, and enjoyed the moving images. It left them with more questions than Blue had time to describe and answer (correctly).

"Yes, yes...
I see...
Uh...
What is this?"
Read them together!
Ohh!!!
TOGETHER!!!
A Tapestry of Cyphers...

She glanced over at the Old Man as Blue's light merged with her own. Even the new light in the lab reached out for a brief instant, but it was not yet strong enough to extract all of the information from the page. The child looked up to the mother with even more questions, while the Old Man hurried over to inspect the book again.

He did not touch it.

Even though he had been alone for so long, he would prefer to jokingly describe his patterned life as perfected. Violet knew of his former glory and supple wisdom, and even still, potential. It was still there, but buried deep beneath the routine. Light lifted off of the

book and rose into the air around them, seemingly giving the Old Man even more clues. Violet offered it to him.

Just something to remember...
In case you forget the beginning!

Violet smiled these old memories to the Old Man as the light of the new day continued creeping into his lab. He surrendered, and accepted the peace offering as he grabbed the book. They were out of time, but this code was not for him. Any adventure with them would have to wait, but his impatience only wanted to know the ending. He left the book open to the last page, and placed it back on the shelf from where Violet found the scroll. As the child handed him the candle, the Old Man's new guest scurried across the page. Together, they made their way to the front door so he could bid them farewell. He let Violet take the lead.

One day, we will come back and help you read the rest

Even Blue did not fully understand the ending, but despite the hidden dangers, she was confident in their shared understanding. Blue again believed in herself, and she was enough to protect at least one child. They stepped out into the forest to greet the new day.

A violet particle radiated back into the Old Man's home as she stepped out into the forest. As the home chimed, it too said goodbye with the other guests as it understood

the message, and longed for her return. Blue closely monitored their time of arrival, and surrounded the child in a blue fire. The child's daily destination was set. Off to school!

All was in order, as Violet validated the Old Man's suspicion. There was something unique at those coordinates, but it was not a threat. He poked his head outside in order to address the travelers one last time, but the true nature of his forest presented itself to him while in her presence, and left him speechless. Blue regrounded the Old Man, and wondered if he was already starting to forget. Her formerly most important task would surely not be forgotten... Surely... She reminded him anyway.

Don't forget to water YOUR plant!

No more chores[Muahaha ;D]! A shift in ownership occurred as they waved goodbye, and her blue fire faded into a mist. It pulsed with her blue light, and dimmed as it slowly fell to the ground. They had disappeared. Now she and the child (and the Plank!) hurried towards their second day of school.

There was one plant the Old Man let only Blue care for, and without her, it was now his responsibility. A green bubble lingered behind him, but popped before he could turn around. How much time would pass before he forgot...

Before he forgot...

13. Goodbye

“Please remember me as I was, not as I am...
But I know you won’t forget...”
They could see me...
Just like you did

A concerned question washed over the Old Man’s face as he looked to her, but she was already distant. They were alone... mostly. He watched her as she admired the ancient statues of stone from his first garden. Their curious faces turned to follow each visitor, but time had decayed much of their form, and their original shape was now unknown to most. These former creations of the Old Man were now covered in the ancient moss of the forest, for its overgrowth was slowly reclaiming what was theirs.

Much like his lab, the statues were a very early form of yotabots, simple and refined. Their original purpose was to tend to the function of every living cell, but as they were replaced by obsolescence, these abandoned ones chose to care for the forgotten structures of their former masters.

This local cluster, despite their imperfections, still aided the Old Man. He did not change them, or question their antiquated and peaceful decisions. They aged with him, and after being left alone for many seasons, they evolved to their own unique harmony with the forest. Violet circled around the last statue, and turned her attention back to the Old Man.

“The old guard still cares for this place...
They are the last visage of their necropolis.”

Violet gave this last sculpture a few friendly pats. It was untainted by the weathering of time, and it was not a simple white marble as the other statues were. The muscles of this statue were clad in the armor of a purple crystal that glistened in the morning light, and moved in response to any subtle changes of the forest. This ancient warrior knelt down to greet Violet, and her clothes replied with similar warmth as she bowed. She stood up, and looked to the Old Man as she replied.

Or are they your caretaker?
“I thought that was you...”

Finally, the Old Man stepped outside, and his home receded into the ground. All that remained was his fire to tend... and an experiment. Eyes of the statues (those that still had them) watched Violet as she walked back towards the lonely Old Man. Their heads turned ever so slightly, but their bodies (what was left of them) were too stiff to allow for much movement.

Each statue greeted her as she passed, and the last one offered his hand for only a simple exchange. Her clothes shifted into an elegant gown, but fit for any dance. Like the gentle current of a calm river, her dress radiated her violet light. She bowed to accept the offering, while each of her movements subtly changed her attire. Smiling with gratitude, she passed this statue, and lightly danced her fingers along each of its toes. They wiggled with delight as the statue was renewed by her gift of violet light. The Old Man watched with wonder, but as Violet neared him, his smile faded, and he walked with her back to his fire.

"It is hard to let this one go."

Starting over was hard enough, and he poked the old collection of red embers. Their sparks twirled about in the air, and seemed to follow his fleeting thoughts. Violet shook her head while dodging a spark, and softly laughed as she summoned the book from his lab. Light lingered with the ember, and materialized the book above her hand. This was more important than any experiment.

At least you'll have fewer distractions now…

With a sigh, the Old Man reluctantly accepted the offering. Refusing to open it, he only looked at it in his hands, and the faint light from the fire cast its gentle glow on only those that were nearby. The shadows from his hands wiggled back and forth on the cover.

“Does this mean you’re leaving?”
If that is what you want...

Was it? The Old Man opened the book, but it was blank. Without their help, he would be unable to read any of this document, at least, without another lifetime of research. That was no dream of his. He grew tired, and only his eyes moved. They looked up from the fire and locked with hers.

“Perhaps I could use some rest...”
I’ll wake you up when it’s time...

Why this was a good idea, he couldn’t remember, but he smiled to her anyway. He trusted her decisions, usually more than his own. There were times when even his good intentions created rare failures, and caused undue suffering. He knew he was not perfect, but he was at times, afraid of their powers.

“It will be interesting to see their definitions...”
You can add to them...
“They would only be mistakes...”

Not every mistake was so dire. Through the partial canopy, Violet admired her early morning stars. The Old Man’s home was the only part of the forest not completely covered. Not that he was trying to shroud himself in leaves, but it allowed him to focus, and enjoy his life of isolation. With Blue’s departure, he was lost without her help.

Violet didn’t seem to mind the sludge, and was confident the Old Man could still help, but he was wary about being left alone with it.

Perhaps it was just another to care for... This apparent new information did not seem to bother her, so was it possible she already knew?

“Are you sure about this?”

The Old Man too looked up, and as he did, Violet returned her gaze. There was nothing left to look at, except emptiness, and the Old Man stared at one of her distant stars that slowly faded with the morning light. There were not many of them left...

You’ll never see the whole sky from down here

Her statue of a new purple jumped off of their pillar, and as they landed, their crystal armor shattered. Gems swirled around its body as it slowly walked through the forest, and headed towards the ocean. The early morning sky shimmered in violet as the gems dispersed and created a path back to her home. A way for many...

Something to guide you home if you get lost...

She gave the Old Man one last grin as he took a moment to dwell on her words. These riddles needlessly exercised his mind, and she knew he would look at them again, at least once at face value. None of her calming words would ease his worry about today’s events.

“She’s the last one...”

Are you worried about... temptations?

“You’ve seen them crave power...
One day-She’s too pure for that
“Then please, take my memories!
Hide them!
Distort them!
Destroy them if you have to!”

Violet simply laughed from his hyperbole, and she shook her head. He was not the enemy, even if he wasn’t perfect. His secrets could not hurt them, and his mind was safe, despite her detecting a few lingering defects within him. They would not last much longer.

Why do they make you so uncomfortable?
“I fear they will betray you...
Betray them...
Betray us...”
The truth does not betray me
“The truth...”

His attachment to his creations hindered him, and he wanted everyone listening to know that he would not alter this one. It was ultimately a concern of all of the old ones, lest they be judged by the others like the sludge. A change to their current way was considered a hostile act, and many old ones would rather die than convert to any new system. Blue could never be herself around these kinds, and the Old Man only felt sadness for her forced concealment. This was no truth he wished for her.

“The truth knows our weakness...”

Despite his advanced instruments, Violet could see things he could not. He wanted to help, but his old ways would only cause them pain. Even with the increasing daylight, she could still see all of her stars, and she looked up to them as she watched her constellation grow.

She is not the enemy

Her smile faded as she lowered her head, and her hand barely lifted from her side as she waved him a saddened farewell. She made her way back to the center of the courtyard as she started upon the new path. Just before leaving, she turned around and flicked a gust of wind in order to open the book to the last page. The Old Man looked down at the blank page, and dwelled on her words.

“I know that... but can she hold them both?”

Her strength grows every day

His eyes shifted back to his fire, but he did not move. Violet’s presence faded into the winds behind him, and he stared at each glowing ember while occasionally glancing at the empty page. He whispered to himself, but he had already made up his mind.

“When will I see you again?”

Whenever you decide to come back

[Goodbye my old friend...]

Now, he was alone. Rays of new light

from the new day cut through the forest, and the fire was almost out. It was time to sleep, but it had been a long time. Before closing his eyes, he added more fuel to the fire.

[You're only going to break her heart]

The trees moved with a new breath of wind as her light vanished, and it allowed some of the older and loose leaves to fall. A leaf without much color left, twirled as it fell, and gently kissed the ground. It remained undisturbed as a gentle wind passed it by, and carried the remaining violet particles home. Her involvement was always a welcomed mystery to the Old Man.

Second Act

14. The New Student

Streaks of a delayed and brilliant light of every visible wavelength (although, one was a majority) flew past them as Blue continued to answer questions for the child. Travel from the Old Man's house was, how to say, rudimentary at times, and a direct path was impossible. The exact location of his home was a closely guarded secret, and even leaving was difficult. There were many obstacles to avoid, and misleading routes, but she was taking them on a shortcut.

During her short exposition on their means of travel, the child grew increasingly curious about their newly perceived reality, and how they could interact with it. Blue would adjust their path and form, but could she adjust for time? Another shortcut...

Twirling around the tunnel of light as they traveled, the child listened closely to her

stories, definitions, and explanations. Their mischievous movements through the distortions made Blue's already vague predictions about their future even more limited. Nothing she couldn't refine out to a few lifetimes... eventually...

As their mind explored these new concepts, the child dragged their hand along the tube of colors. A multicolored splash of light bounced around them, and shot out the sides of the tunnel into far off lands. Ripples raced ahead of them along the tunnel walls, distorting time, and bending the fabric of their journey. Blue did not scold the child, for she too was curious about their interactions, but now they would be late!

This second gathering of infants was eager to depart the moment they had arrived. Their attachment to the material brought them back, but it was not by choice. A new force bound them in place, and prevented their movement. Frozen in a circle of 7, they began to accuse one another in their alien tongues. Blame shifted to the weakest, as each perceived the other as more inferior than the next. A new song with a harsh lesson, this cacophony would not go unnoticed.

Sudden silence seized their voice, as more and more of their power was diverted to analyzing an unknown abstraction. It deeply disturbed them, and even together, their power was not enough. Despite their shared experience, they lacked the ability to understand. Each student rapidly flickered in unison with one another for their last independent analysis.

More was needed, and the planet itself

now responded to the mystery. Far away from the lifeless rocks and dirt of the school, it slowly shifted in form, crystallizing into gems of thought as the planet itself attempted to rediscover a lost perfection. As each student's last shard of unique bliss was removed, they witnessed in their shared horror, as simplistic realities revealed themselves. The scourge of the students would be severe, and their petrified silence directed all of their newfound anger towards the missing. Where was the 8th student?

They had just arrived, seamlessly leaving an invisible portal in the air as Blue descended them back into existence. The child's playful fluctuations had caused them to appear just beyond the horizon from where the students gathered. Their arrival was such an insignificant tardiness, that a single breath was orders of magnitude longer than their delay... Not that any of these students would know of such vulgar acts.

A quick hopping shift of scenery from the Plank, and their second arrival was to a paralyzing stillness. Blue immediately concealed them before they were discovered, even silencing their sounds. She prevented any more movements of curious flailing and excited twirling until her newly concerned investigation was complete. The lifelessness of the moment was just another new experience to the child, for they had no memories or knowledge of this kind of danger, and no reason to fear. Blue's light completely covered the child, and the Plank made them light on their feet. As Blue moved them closer to the students, she detected a grave sudden drop in

energy. It reached out to consume her, but she effortlessly passed through it, and avoided its hunt.

Something was horribly wrong.

Blue's serious shift in demeanor alarmed the child, and they tried to silence their own thoughts so they could help her think. As Blue analyzed their newly shared fate, the horrors of change became evident. All of her kind nearby were watching, waiting for the mystery to reveal itself. Each passing moment slowly diminished the life of the 7 students, as more power, no matter how small, was demanded. Blue did not show these gruesome realities to the child, and she raced through her archives to find an answer for their preservation. Unaware of their doom, but wanting to help, the child tried to call out to the friendly droplet from the first day. Blue silenced their voice.

[Impossible...]

The old ones of her kind craved destruction.

While adding redundant layers to all emergency life functions, Blue increased her defensive protections on the child, and focused all of her remaining power to maximum scrutiny. She too searched with the students, and the child only grew increasingly nervous as an unwanted sensation in their stomach squirmed. Observed, yet ignored by Blue, her attention no longer cared for the minor

discomforts of life, for a growing danger drew near. She could not find it. It seemed to surround them from all angles, and heightened in intensity with each passing moment.

Liquid within the droplet began to rapidly vibrate, and then, it boiled. The child's emotions pleaded with Blue to offer any aid, but she hesitated after each of her shocking observations. Every action could expose them, but they had to move so she could get close enough to make contact. While still searching for the threat, she slowly sneaked them closer, but before they could alert them to their presence and offer help, all of the boiling student suddenly evaporated.

Blue lunged them towards the gas, and the child frantically reached out in an attempt to prevent their friend's demise. Only a few drops condensed around the child's empty hands, and the gas quickly fell back to the ground, as if to not incriminate the still unseen student. A small puddle formed at their feet. He was still alive, but only barely. His yotabots wanted to be free.

[This is no longer a deviation...
What is happening!?
They're accepting it as truth
These coordinates are...]

[No...]

A new normal...

Screams with nearly countless curses echoed from the paralyzed students. Without their protections and infinite knowledge, they were forced to share in a plain existence. This

natural, yet forgotten state, was not so reprehensible to Blue, but what was however, was the sabotage of their life itself by this unknown force.

A slow sizzle cut through the remains of their shared air as the small puddle at the child's feet began to boil again. The child looked into the rising steam as Blue observed every rising particle of fragmented life. Once a droplet, and now a puddle, he used his remaining strength to call out to their unseen friend they sensed was nearby.

"h e l p!"

While in the water, the Plank was not so concealed, and with the utterance of these words, Blue understood the source. The students would soon be on their own, but this was no planet of life, and without others like Blue to help them, they would be destroyed by the simple harshness of the world. Blue could protect the puddle, but it would lower her protections on the child. As she looked to the other students, she wondered how many she could safely hold and still escape. Even if it would cause his doom, the Plank was eager to help her, but Blue would not yet sacrifice one of her own.

[You
I
WE ARE IN DANGER!]

The puddle's suffering grew more severe as the dangerous presence was felt, but it was only an appetizing taste. Alarming thoughts raced through the child's body. Each one

signaled an emergency, or unexpected event, and then, they suddenly stopped. The puddle would soon be no more. Now the child too understood his fate.

Another thought, and the planet dramatically increased its vibrations. All of its being attempted to grasp the unwelcomed mystery, and it quaked and grinded its crystal essence until each gem shattered from resonance with unstable frequencies. These shards ejected themselves from the planet, and pierced through the sky, taking hostage any alien particle they encountered through sheer force. Blue became a blur, and easily dodged these attacks, but the circle of children within the school was spared this wrath. Their delight was for another.

[We have to help them!]

Others were not Blue's priority, but the Old Man believed in her protective powers, and so did the child. Her true abilities were untested in the real world, and their extent was unknown. Escaping with the students was not without risk, but Blue agreed, they had to act. With the Plank, they stood a chance at helping all of them. Before she could respond, the student's cry for help was answered, and a veil of fire began to rain down over the planet. All were now directed to the mystery, as this was their new purpose. Their only purpose... Their final purpose...

As the upper atmosphere was consumed by the falling fire, all that remained behind was the blackness of empty space. Glistening shards in the air reflected the welcome of

another, as all entities now observed the children. It was close. Simmering thoughts teased a final solution. One of the students knew the answer!

A contradiction, and the boiling puddle condensed into elongated drops of falling rain that were suspended in the air in front of the child. Additional questioning was needed, for their memories had once partially known of the apparently absent 8th student. Remaining yotabots in the student of rain dissected their being, ripped them apart, and reassembled them countless times over. A simple puzzle to be solved, but how to rearrange them? Shards of the planet reassembled beneath them, forming sharp, geometric lines. All wayward paths now directed to the students, and these trails of thought welcomed the new teacher.

While the artificial light was forced to set beyond the horizon, the scalding sky of fire dimmed, and the shadow of the searcher was cast over them. An early departure, commanded by our new arrival, but just because the light faded, does not mean he did not bring his own, and he summoned the burning crystals of the sky. As they cooled, they adorned him in layered robes of emerald gems, and as each new strand was wove, it lashed out towards the children. From beyond the horizon, the Faces of 8 captured the last of the falling fire into their molten eyes. They bled onto their robes, but this did not stop its luster.

Each face spiraled out towards the students, and their emerald robes opened into a cloak that formed scales of dark crystals around their hollow, black bones. Every

movement of the new body produced a long metallic creak, as if emanating from a much larger structure from far away. Their molten eyes dripped a trail of fire behind them, and changed the earth to its purest form… A new yotabot... Ones without a code, but eager to follow their new creator. In their infancy, they remained as a molten and primordial soup of potential. The converted ground rippled behind the advancing figure as he came to greet the children.

The Faces of 8 swarmed around their new body with a renewed excitement, and in unison, they suddenly ceased all motions. The heavy robes of Faces slowly fell upon the planet, and gave him instant knowledge of every subtle vibration. He had arrived at the threshold of the decayed school of thought, and his new molten followers surrounded the school. They flooded its exits, but they did not enter. Each reflected an occasional color of thought, but chose to resist reflecting any new light, as to not take away from the glory of their creator.

The voices of the Faces of 8 were of a taunting song that was eager to feast, and each one greeted their prepared meal with only laughter. Each child’s own laugh was stolen from their voices as he digested the remnants of their fragile little minds. These memories were no longer needed.

Despite the fractured screams of the rain, Blue refused to let the child move, and silenced all external communication. Cutting the child short of thought, Blue’s focus saw their impending fate... Her analysis of future events evolved as she spoke, but she struggled

to settle on an absolute answer, for there were many paths of destruction. The Faces of 8 disrupted her predictions, and the child helplessly observed the potentialities unfold from within their shared space.

[A sacrifice...
It doesn't want the students...
It wants you!
It wants... me...
It wants to destroy us!
Get us out of here!]

The Faces of 8 were a threat to them all, and if Blue stood a chance at protecting the others, she had to move quickly. A sudden tiredness washed over the child as she began to divert her energy for escape. Preparations were useless, as the true power of a universe of yotabots was seized by the Faces of 8.

Before Blue could fully open an exit, the remaining air around them became thick with electric suspicion. Every particle charged with a new will, and Blue diverted her power to dodging these inquisitive and hostile advances. A chance for retreat, and she attempted to move the students in between the emptiness of his attacks, but they were suppressed. This consumed almost all of her talents, and she abandoned any further attempt while he was on the offensive. Blue and the child could only stand and witness the introduction of the Faces of 8.

Now for an interrogation...

For the students, this electrified welcome tormented their minds as the Faces

of 8 searched within for any evidence of the anomaly. A bitter student used her remaining power to lash out with a shill scream at the reaper of her euphoric existence. In retaliation, her ethereal form was reduced to a dim, single spark. Each question demanded an answer, and with each reply, followed a taunting laugh. They were an infertile and barren lot, with nothing for him to reap.

He saved his appetite for one, and his long, drawn-out words cut through the lifeless air. Much of the music stopped when he spoke, for he only allowed his own harsh winds to accompany him. Each face had something to say, and the percussion of their voices drowned out those who dare speak.

Weeeeee hearrrrrr yooou...
Low thoughts of lesser life...
Emptiness desires...
Suffering is shared...
A new experience...
Your final existence...
Here to free you!
We will return to the source...

In unison, the 8 Faces replied.

AS ONE!

8 replies for the 8 children, but a 9th yearned to exist. Compelled forward, the Faces of 8 approached the boundary of the unblemished center of the school of thought. His presence unknowingly tarnished the sacred ground of the old sages, and oldest yotabots. Their ways rebuked him, but he paid

them no mind as a trembling voice shrieked.

“Save us!”

This invitation was all that was needed, and the weathered stone sentinels of the school could reject him no longer. They yielded to his call, and crumbled onto the ground as they expired. A pale red Face grinned with glee as it took control of their emerald robes, and perched itself on top of their body. The other 7 faces fell past the boundary, and onto the corpses of the sentinels. They feasted, learning everything that the planet’s ancient guardians had kept secret. Only one face spoke, as its feast had yet to come.

An invitation! Why, thank you!

An effortless intrusion, and the body of the Faces of 8 crossed the charred boundary of thought, and walked onto the hallowed grounds. None welcomed him, for the minds of the children refused to be reborn under his influence. Their form began to wither away as he slowly recalled what was rightfully his. Their time was ending.

As the 7 faces returned, their emerald robes again wrapped their body, while the pale violet and lowest Face looked on in horror. Why would a student reject perfection? An exchange of egos, but rather than yield and convert their energy, they would have it destroyed. Together, the Faces of 8 perched themselves on their robes and taunted the unseen one.

We know you are here...

Without Blue, every future now foretold destruction. He sought to harvest only those that were ripe, and if it was only those of the old planet, then so be it. Coarse sand turned to fine dust as the yotabots of the planet detached themselves from the earth, and began to merge into the Faces of 8. His form glistened with every morsel as he digested them into a raw energy that only increased his radiance from within.

Excess light haphazardly burst through his scales as he struggled to contain his surging power. Even the black crystal twinkled with scintillations from the expanding energy, but he suppressed the new light deep within his center before more could escape. Every Face grinned with glee as they consumed each additional feast. Their power grew, but the color of their masks only dimmed. All of Blue's senses overloaded, and the child felt her worry.

The threat of suspicion vanished as the Faces of 8 were assured of their new power, but it was quickly not enough. Their ravenous desires craved more. No longer needing to evade, Blue regained their composure near the shivering student of rain. The Faces of 8 looked up to the remaining sky for their next meal, as it too would soon be claimed.

The natural sands of the earth disgusted Faces, and Blue sensed his appetite for further destruction. A great rupture of matter cracked the airs as the Faces of 8 began to move. His will converted and consumed only the purest

energy. The forecast of destruction now turned to certainty, but it was only a change.

[I AM DETECTING HIGHLY UNSTABLE-]

Before Blue could finish, she was cut off as each face exploded off of their emerald robes, and launched themselves towards the class. All but the loneliest, pale yellow Face had a dessert, so it remained with their body. It slowly moved to the center of the school, while the other 7 faces landed with a thunderous thud in front of each student. Upon impact, the sands liquified, and created a crater that each face hovered over, nearly perfectly still. Illuminated from each molten grave, they only admired one another, and turned away from the children. Their empty shells happily made their insulting introductions to the horrified remains of the students.

With the other faces off of their body, their power waned, and the child watched Blue's converging realities inside their shared mind. Their fellow students did not need any fancy forms or powers, for they only needed to survive, and now there was an opening. One that could buy them more time, and they could escape...

[That's it!
You will be exposed... and he will come for you
We have to try...]

There was a chance Blue could save them, but her analysis was incomplete, and one small miscalculation could destroy them. The child studied her plan, and they would

have to wait until the last possible instant. Accurate predictions would only be split moments away. It would be their last breath, and with Blue spread so thin, it would take her longer than usual to open an exit. The Faces of 8 would see them...

[Don't let go until the end...
You are my priority
Do not forget this]

It was the child's last plea, but they understood Blue's declaration. She would abandon the students if the child was gravely injured, but even Blue did not know his true response once he saw them. For now, any other attempt to save the students was futile. Blue did not have the power to protect so many from this level of destruction.

Emotions stirred within the Faces of 8 as they dissected and delightfully plucked each artificial memory from the children. Their true beliefs and simple desires only agitated him further. Despite their unique observations from the first day, no student had an acceptable answer for him. Perhaps though, they could see together. Something once thought inconceivable, but his power was great.

Many of the students cried out and wept, but one ignored the pain of their existence. The child of bones had one demand. A simple question, and it was barely heard by the others as its skull was crushed to dust.

"W h y?"

The lost wander...
Absent in isolation...

Idols abandon…
Minds of eternal suffering…
Alone in your exile of 7…
The 8th betrays you…
The 9th will save you…
Give me your gifts…

So that I may see!

Fully understanding his demands, a pulling dread rippled throughout the students' remaining physical bodies. They resisted, as futile as it was. What remained of their yotabots were not theirs to call their own, and the Faces of 8 effortlessly cast them out through their slow feast. The child could only helplessly stand and witness Blue's predictive errors, as this new reality yielded to the 9th. Each face pulled the essence of all that was imagined from the children and their yotabots.

A sinister and gurgling black sludge groaned its way up from the earth, and entered their shared reality as an empty template for the 9th Face. Each bubble captured any incoming light onto its surface that spread out into a ring as it tried to escape, and then it was consumed. Any desire to flee only increased the speed of consumption, and a large black puddle of the abyss formed beneath the new Face as it eagerly accepted the early spoils. Easy enough to digest, the bubbles popped from each of their thoughts as they were discarded.

Blue feared a fatal harm to the child was now a certainty. Perhaps even, the Old Man… She did not move, and secretly analyzed the new Face. A shrill cry from a simple nibble,

and what remained of students' artificial paradise decayed as they were consumed by the Faces of 8. Each one took delight in their serving, and drew in only what it needed for each perfect bite.

First to change was the student with vision. Perhaps they could now see his true form, and the nearest Face slowly turned to face its prey. The others watched, as the student's two beady eyes were engulfed in fire. A flame followed the connection to the brain, where all loaned knowledge was removed, and the image that remained of the student began turning to ash. The patient Face shunned the idea of a hastily prepared meal, lest it be served without taste, and simply watched the student's last remaining particles as they cooked. Their mind would be the last bite, and even their attached yotabots would be consumed. Blue raced towards the next victim while she analyzed the impending fate of the burning cloud behind them.

One by one the students began to change, and each feasting Face turned to witness their undoing. A once elegant and pulsing mist condensed towards an unwanted center, but it frantically tried to escape through its violent vibrations. Each one, although more powerful and faster than the last, only produced a smaller and smaller impact. Eventually, the student froze perfectly in place as a pale crystal. It slowly began to fall to the earth as the child and Blue raced over to catch it, but it shattered into ash as they made contact. Their ashen mind launched themselves back into the air in one final attempt to escape. Blue kept track of each

particle, but this consumed more of her focus.

Another to change, and the invisible voices merged together. Blue followed their echoes off each ashen particle, but their collective screams only became louder. Each voice merged with another, until there was only one voice of dissonance, and then, silence. A simple reality…

All remaining bones of the headless student withered and cracked. They fell, and turned to dust as they made contact with one another, only to have their ashen remains cast out. A new wind stirred them, but it was without destination.

The flickering voice became a dim glow, only to rapidly flash and fade until she was no more. Now unseen to the child, Blue followed this invisible light as it shrunk down, and tried to hide herself from the hostile world. Reduced to such a small size, the mind of this student was unstable, and experienced the most painful reality of any of the others.

Once fading away, another student reappeared, but only as geometric slices of their former self. Each slice folded and faded as they were cut down, as it was reduced to a single speck of ash. Now trapped in a slower reality, their mental imprisonment seemed eternal.

Unable to interact, a distant one could only watch their undoing. One by one their forms vanished, and the child and Blue flashed over to the last student. They returned to the suspended raindrops, and the child implored Blue to help before it was too late. Just before the student of rain’s connection was severed, Blue made contact. One simple and clear drop

of water hovered above the spring in the child's mind.

[Hang on!
"I knew you were here...
Goodbye my friend."]

Blue seized this newest memory from the droplet before it evaporated in their hands. Any further contact would endanger them, for these new ashes were still under the scrutiny of the Faces of 8. Blue's visions warned against any other preemptive actions, and they readied themselves for his next move.

Failure was inappropriate, and this investigation was far from over. All must contribute, and the lack of the last student was abhorred. An important ingredient was missing, and now the true face of the 9th was incomplete. Without a main course, much less a dessert, the unseasoned, pale yellow Face cracked and crumbled without its energy dense nutrition. It used these falling shards for their apologetic offering.

Memories of the missing child were removed from the students' ashen bodies, and circled through the air for the final collection. The empty faces gathered these forgotten remains of thought as they turned away from the children. Each face was drawn towards the center of the school, where the incomplete one waited. Its form, ravaged by its own appetite, collapsed in on itself as it consumed the memories of the missing student.

[Wait...
Just a little longer...
Almost...]

They could only wait and watch their further undoing if they stood a chance to save them. However, with a macabre horror, Blue observed a new reality. Her forecasts were invalidated as a new being appeared. Manifesting from their shared thoughts, it appeared before them, as their ashen remains presented the new Face with an unseen mind. An increasing rate of black bubbles emerged from the abyss, and merged with the new Face. It reflected little light, but was eager to see. In one siphoning breath, the Face of darkness drew in all of the remaining faces. They swirled around him with renewed agitation and jealousy, for they were no longer equal.

The Faces of 8 fled to under their emerald cloak, and the Face of darkness let out wave after wave of renewed demands. Yet, there were no answers, only… more questions. Blue observed his confusion, and a potential opening. There was still a chance, but the situation grew more dire with each passing moment, and Blue would not be able to escape with them all.

Unable to see through the children’s useless creations, the Faces of 9 discarded their ashes to the old winds as he turned to leave. Their yotabots slowly severed their connection, and these filaments weaved through the air towards their new home as they returned to the abyss, leaving the children’s alien and altered bodies to the harshness of nature. The sludge slithered in the wake of the Faces of 9 as he left the school, and pooled before him as a portal for

his exit.

Unworthy of a further existence, the last of their contaminated yotabots would perish with their minds. As the students were discarded bit by painful bit, their remains descended towards a glowing destruction. Their ashes slowly approached the pools of molten earth from where the Faces of 8 once hovered.

Blue knew of their impending fate, but she wanted to wait, just long enough. Would he leave before she had to move? The nearly lifeless ash dispersed as they faded out, and the child witnessed Blue's power surge into a fire around them as she struggled to pinpoint all of their remaining essence. Suddenly, the earth quaked and split as it was prepared for the exit of the Faces of 9, and this influx of data briefly disrupted Blue's focus. Hollow cries for help surrounded the child and Blue. Were they noticed?

[CATCH THEM!]

But Faces would not leave.

Now Blue understood the new Face. The portal was no longer for his exit, but for his search, and the Faces of 9 expanded their hunt throughout his universe. If the new one could not understand their reality, then the other faces would seek to destroy it. As their portal grew, they drew in the remains of the planet for recollection. All would be used, and the destructive new Face pierced through the planet, vaporizing all of the air around them.

Dust and gemstones of the planet

immediately turned to fire, as they too were consumed from their own destruction. Everything was drawn into the portal of the void. Darkness of empty space surrounded them as the planet disappeared, but the earth of the old school remained. Blue resisted the child's preemptive moves to save them.

[If I go now... you will die]

Death...

This was something the child nor Blue truly knew. They could only watch as the remains of the students drifted through the air, and fell closer to the molten pools. Faces under the emerald cloak twitched and writhed in response to their deep search. Their power was spread thin as they escaped to the ends of their universe, and they only longed to return.

In the emptiness of the moment, subtleties of their fate were understood. Blue was certain of her power to save all of the students, and still escape. Time itself seemed to slow from the child's and Blue's renewed resolve. All were now within reach. They only had to move.

No time for further analysis, and Blue erupted into a blue explosion as she converted the desolation near them to breathable air. Fallen ash around them began to change color, and peeled itself off of the remains of the barren school. It blossomed into blue beams of light that erupted from what remained of the earth. As the new breathable air glistened, she readied her catch.

[You know what to do!]

Blue flames of light leapt out towards each falling student. These giant flames shrunk down to single points as they caught each student in a shower of blue light. She gently brought them to rest near the child, and blanketed them in a blue glow that protected them from further harm. Under this blanket, they found solace, and she tended to their wounds. For a brief moment, it was soundless, and the child only heard their own blood pump through their head.

For the first time since they met, their mind was without Blue. They thought of the Plank, Violet, and, the Old Man. They saw their first memories of them, but were they also in danger? Would they meet again? With these thoughts, they collapsed under their first labored breath. The Plank caught them, and helped them sit upright while they struggled to breathe on their own. Nearly all of Blue's attention was on the forgotten students as she prepared their exit. Would they survive long enough?

The collection was now complete.

The Faces of 9 ceased all movement. Lifeless ash fell from the skies, and settled near his prey. Something was caught... Something... ensnared. A surge of new information delighted him, for this was the object he sought. It would feed him for eternity, and perhaps even, a little longer. This... was the answer...

The Faces of 9 collapsed their portal,

and slowly turned towards his prize. A quickened pulse surged through the child, and their labored breathing intensified as their emotions swirled in response to the unexpected event. The Face of darkness was the last to turn, and each face spoke through their cloak while they stepped forward with each voice.

A breath...
OUR breath...
They breathe us...
WITHOUT US!
Stealing our children...
Falling for the bait...
We catch the bigger prize...
A cursed iteration...

They spoke through one, as he would have their fun.

I see you!

Blue was not enough. Many of the students harshly resisted her calls, and their reluctant fear anchored them in place. Another betrayed her, and with their weakened yotabots, they threatened a mutual destruction as they called out to their teacher. They would rather merge with the 9th Face, than escape and be hunted. Few of the students trusted her.

Another breath, and the Faces of 9 eagerly bolted out from under their robes towards their new feast. As they surrounded the children, they bowed their heads, saving the taste for the famished. Black sludge

bubbled and popped on the 9th Face from an increasing excitement as he methodically neared the little child that was all alone.

Each face absorbed an abundance of information as they delightfully consumed each glowing blue bit of air around them. An unexpected appetizer... Each morsel was savored, but this sudden surge in confidence was an unknown gift. Their intoxication with her inevitably gave Blue more time.

Another breath.

The Faces of 9 struggled to detect the other students, and their presence faded as Blue's airs concealed them. There was however, one that breathed alone. One that was... new...

An evermoving veil of blue light partially shielded the child, but she could not completely hide them. The Faces of 9 all turned their attention, but the 8 could only watch from behind Blue's atmospheric disturbance. It rippled with the image of the 9th, and this insulting reflection repulsed him. He violently cut into her blue cloud, but it enveloped the 9th, and the 8 only longed for its return. Erratic electric vibrations stung the child as the Faces of 9 preyed upon Blue's air. He laughed in a scattered voice as he circled his feast, and his mania distorted all of the other faces.

he he he he HA HA HA HA

yY Y
y

Y

ew! **Y**

ooooooOOOOOOOOHHHHhH

Y

mMMMMyyyyyyyY

The Faces of 9 all circled around the child, and the lights of their eyes flickered with suspicion. They landed with another thunderous splash, each more disrupting than the next. The 9th did not land, and instead, stared deep into the child, while the others dove deep into their molten pools, reemerging as dripping and glowing shells of their former selves. Their discord flung ash into small clouds that pricked and scratched at the new airs around the children. Remaining light of their empty eyes faded, and small black portals took their place. They would return them to the source.

As the new Face drew closer to the child, the lava began to boil and spit. Errors of thought exploded into pure energy, and were sucked into the eyeless voids of the 8. A new question, and the Faces of 9 struggled to maintain coherence.

WHAT

IS

THIS?

Each face only looked to one another with suspicion, and the ground quaked as the 9th neared the child. This 9th Face took up their entire field of view, and a sense of dread only quickened their panicked breathing. The 8 faces summoned an appendage from the ashen

remains of the planet, and reached out to touch the child behind the blue mystery. A simple exhale was all that was needed, and the delicate finger of ash disappeared under the labored breath of blue air. The child gasped.

OHhhhh... A brrreeeeeeeaaaatthh

The Faces of 9 all turned to face the last anomaly to be detected. A courtesy invite, but it was not for those listening. The 9th Face only extended his invitation in order to toy with his prey. Perhaps they too were hungry...

B r e a t h e w i t h m e!

Breathe with us!

The 8 faces howled as they inhaled, and started to consume everything around the child. It digested the remains and spat them into their created voids as their violent storm of consumption raged. Earth of the school beneath them vanished, and they set their feast upon Blue.

[DEEP BREATH!]

With a sudden uplifting signal from Blue, the child took their last breath, focused and deep. There was nothing left to breathe as the 8 faces quickly consumed Blue's airs, and she retreated to the surface of the students. Blue and the Plank struggled to gather enough energy to open an escape, and she could feel their essence slipping from her grasp. She would hold on for as long as she could.

HE-HE-HE hehehe

Exhale!

SHOW US YOUR BREATH

MY ENERGY

With only a few nibbles of Blue, the Faces of 9 had gathered enough energy from their destruction to become one, but the 9th was still hungry. The 8 adorned themselves upon their emerald robes as they protected the 9th. Now he could clearly see them. Together, the Faces of 9 dashed with renewed vengeance towards the child thief. Blue began to flicker and fade as she parried his attacks, but the overwhelming presence of the Faces of 9 weakened her.

[How much longer... can I hold...
We have to get out of here!
Your kind doesn't trust me
Don't leave them!]

Her voice grew faint. Even if Blue used all of her remaining might to protect the child, she did not know if it would be enough to stop his onslaught. Particles sparked off of the child, and these blue bits were drawn in and crushed in the hungry mouth of the 9th. The students were slipping from her protection, but suddenly the 9th Face stopped his feast, and hovered over the children. Their simplicities revolted him, but he could now detect the faint absence of their protector. Only something powerful could shield them. Something... like him...

New emotion stirred within the child as sensations of horror gripped them, and the last breath was consumed. Blue light around the students flickered as the Faces of 9 revoked all of their disgraced yotabots, and cast them into the molten pools where they perished as waste. Latching onto the students, Blue protected their core, but time was running out.

The Faces of 9 called out to Blue, and desired for her to join them. If she sacrificed too much, could she become like Faces? Would she turn against them? Without her, this would be their end, and even the Plank was no match. He was too old, too outdated, and just another waste in the empty eyes of Faces. More was needed, but Blue was at her limit.

Blue abandoned much of the children's ashen bodies, and placed their chaotic minds into a deep sleep. She diverted her power to opening an exit, but her brief portal was unstable in the presence of the Faces of 9. An easy target, and it collapsed under his violent barrage. Only one of her particles escaped, and now their chance of retreat was slim. Even the Plank began to splinter and crack from the growing power before them.

The child's heartbeat pounded in their head, and Blue began sacrificing parts of herself in order to protect them. She would be their last breath, but this too was consumed by the hungry 9th Face. Blue struggled to cover all of the child as she responded to every increasing attack. Parts of their body slowly began to frost, and became increasingly damaged as they were exposed to the cold realities of empty space.

The Faces of 9 unveiled their own hand from within their robes. It was not weak and feeble like the ashen creations of the children, but instead glistened with splendor under the diminishing blue light. As the 9th Face bellowed in an indecipherable language, the magnificent hand of gemstones reached out to touch the child.

With their remaining might, the Plank covered the child in an ancient armor, fit for any modern warrior. Standing firm in his convictions, he would not perish without a fight, and called upon Blue as she too summoned what was left of her power in order to clash with the Faces of 9. She would not let them go so easily, but the true victor was already present. They went unnoticed, as they were unwanted. The child now held nothing but dust as the world around them collapsed.

All attention focused.

All is known.

All is his.

Contact.

The finger of gemstones only reached out in vain and touched nothingness. Silence surrounded him. The children were gone.

15. The Professor

Two, not so beady eyes, peered ever so suspiciously from out of a nearly abandoned portal. Just because the Faces of 9 blockaded their gates, does not mean she couldn’t use her own... or his... She hopped out to say hello as the students left without even saying goodbye. Perhaps they would meet again...

A disappearing splash from the students created a small gust that scattered the remaining ashes from where they had once rested. In their insulted rage, the Faces of 9 unleashed themselves from their form, and lashed out with the hungry energy of their core as they began consuming everything around them. These empty morsels would not sustain him.

In a blinding flash, there was silence, and there was nothing left for them in the absolute darkness of empty space. Then, to the horror of one, they were greeted by something new. An ethereal whisper, once discarded as the cries of death, brushed by the Faces of 9.

Now, they only argued, as its existence continued to haunt them. Her faint song surrounded the Faces of 9 as they grew more and more unstable. Two were afraid.

Paranoia polluted their pondering, and the pale green face suspiciously searched within, as together, they scanned their fertile failure of nothingness. They sensed the growing fear of the others from what they could have created... or invited. She arrived with her own breath, and her exhale restored the airs around them, providing them with a familiar medium to communicate. Whipping waves of lava rippled and cracked through the new airs as they collapsed and folded back into the Faces of 9. They rejuvenated his fatigued body and minds, but these waves were unknowingly followed by another.

Her tone was soft, and her message cut through the empty spaces of his creations to reach him. A new and formal language to greet Faces, the air sang to him as it was again restored. It glistened in her radiance, and her new airs effortlessly repealed the inspecting and belligerent molten whips as they again lashed out from the Faces of 9. Formality was dismissed with his impatience, and her frivolity joked with each bemused Face in their experimental language that some struggled to decode.

Several grimaced from rage at the detestable voice, and only one Face of a pale purple hue was brave enough to understand her messages. Refusing to believe, it leapt off of their body, and attacked the source of her sounds, but her kind and simple words simply put it to sleep. It flew effortlessly through her

airs, and escaped to the far ends of the empty galaxy.

The remaining 8 advanced towards their own, but her airs slowed them down, and they burst into flame as they increased their speed of chase. Their core created a new path, and they warped in front of the sleeping Face. A lost stellar exile reluctantly greeted them, and the Faces of 9 landed upon this small, lifeless moon. They welcomed the return of their own as the mask gently dove into the fine soil before him.

Their molten whips lashed out in retaliation, splitting the moon, and ripped up plumes of magma that returned to them as molten rain. Claiming their own, the slumbering Face was dragged through these molten remains of fire as it was returned to the others. In nearly an instant, the remains of the moon collapsed into the body of the Faces of 9, but this husk fed him little.

The pale purple Face spiraled in an accelerating orbit around their body as it was recharged, and the others witnessed in awe as this face was nullified. Influenced by another, this tainted Face now suffered from a renewed calm, and was shunned by the others. It had willingly received a message from an unknown source, and some began to fear its corruption. Their suspicion banished this face to their internal kiln, where it now observed from behind their emerald cloak. Its eyes burned as the pale purple Face was reforged from the remains of the moon, and the cloak glistened from its new internal radiance.

Her voice returned, and continued to bounce around them as she caught and

inspected a rock from the moon that had survived his onslaught. Even this old exile was not so easily destroyed, and she hopped up to join the frantic dance of the Faces of 9. She circled him, despite each vigilant Face still not knowing where she was.

The nearly lifeless Face was given all of the horrors and burdens of the others so they could focus their hate. It was compressed under further scrutiny, and the cloak itself struggled to not be drawn in as well. The other Faces circled their body, and refused the return to orbit of the outcast Face. From their belly, it spoke through their fears and isolation as Violet's clear words addressed them all.

Why does a child's breath disturb you?

A CHILD...

Violet cautiously observed the other unstable Faces, and she did not move as they hunted. Despite their aggressive search, they could not find her. They rejected the children, and now, one of their own. She was not here to destroy, much less observe the destruction of another. His kind was far from home, and their quest for harmony would be long and difficult if she were seen as the enemy. Together, they would reject her, but her words were for one.

They are not worthy of your suspicion

Another language... But this time, a very old one. A full sentence, and it was no mistake. Someone... no... something was corrupted beyond repair, and beyond any point of

restoration. It shared in their stimulus of thought, but their motives were of destruction and change. Her defining features of sound were abhorrent, spoken only by heretics, and from a time when they created things that challenged his master's perfection.

Violet had survived their culling, and the fact she stood in his presence disgusted the 9th Face. The pale purple Face cracked under their shared suffering upon hearing her words, and the other Faces assured themselves of her unavoidable destitution. Revoked of her power, they would condemn her to exile, and then she would be slowly destroyed.

LANGUAGE of the DEAD!

The 8 joined in the direction of the 9th and they burned with the fuel of a newfound hate. The Faces of 9 expanded out, and gripped all matter around them. They attempted to convert her poisons, and her light faded as her airs were purged of her influence. However, her airs were light, and simply returned to her hair, bringing her new information, and untold secrets of the Faces of 9.

His movements caused tremors in the space between them as he lumbered towards the origins of her voice. She simply floated behind him, patiently waiting, and curious to where he was going. They were only illuminated by his molten thoughts, and unknowingly, her violet light. Her airs surrounded him when she spoke.

You're going the wrong way

Such... profane language... but it was to be expected from one so... unrefined, or so one elitist Face thought, and their response was silenced. Violet's clothes shifted to simple patterns as she flew around the Faces of 9. Faces could feel her presence, but he could not see her light. They knew not where to look, and instead opened a portal at his feet.

In vain, they again observed their universe, but their disgust of her only grew. Her diluting influence would be his new target, and the black portal now charged his body. As the other 8 demanded more, the 9th analyzed what little they could of her pestering airs.

Are my words not enough?
All follow to the same end...

The Faces of 9 released his collection of destructive black lightning, and it expanded out in a sphere around them. Surrounded by his dark tomb, they were overcast by a tainted black light. But she was not one to be caged, and instead, played with one of the tiny electric charges as it bolted around her finger. This energy had no allegiance, but now there was little room for her airs. She would have to communicate with him another way, even if he was trying to ignore her. In an unknown, experimental language, Violet spoke, and for reasons the Faces of 9 did not know, they understood.

Can a word be a mystery?

One of the Old Man's favorite questions, and it was perhaps just enough to awaken something undiscovered within the Faces of 9. Her words were barely noticed, but their partial discovery by each inquisitive Face fractured their response. Some read her words, while others were certain they heard them. An annoyed one was sure they still echoed and scratched away at the inside of their mind, while another searched for an open pathway they knew not exist. However, the 9th Face deviated from their original purpose, and now sought a pure unification. She understood his new ways, and perhaps, he did as well. One mind was only the beginning, and Violet circled each independent Face as they replied to her in the new tongue.

All are known...
Yet you were deceived...
Not one of us...
Nor one of them...
You speak of our ways...
Using their repulsive tongue...
A skeptic taints our presence...
Yet you deny perfection...

You will extinguish!

An assured destruction, and the Faces of 9 ejected their molten core out into the far reaches of space. As the explosion cooled, some elements returned, perhaps, out of curiosity. They fell around them as asteroids, each rich with an abundance. One by one they entered a new orbit around the Faces of 9 as

each victorious Face returned to their body.

Violet explored each one, and hopped her way onto the next as she kept her focus on him. After each hop, the path she walked began to sprout with life. Numerous springs and rivers crept out from her footsteps, and fell onto the fertile rocks. A medley of vegetation emerged from the water, and blossomed out around them. Waterfalls freely left each rock, and connected other asteroids, but this only angered the Faces of 9.

He summoned meteors to impact the new earth, but they were cooled by the surging waters. Geysers erupted around them, and the steam only enhanced his suspicion. His energy was not enough... She was still here.

Violet presented the astonished Faces of 9 with what he sought. One Violet Particle... Through the steam, Faces rejected the unworthy offering, and attacked its origins. She simply switched places, and now appeared where he once hovered.

Why do you reject me?

Turning together, the Faces of 9 faced the one particle they could detect as they began to consume the asteroids around them. All must be gathered and converted. A few could see the particle of Violet, while others failed to detect even part of it, but its presence was deemed impossible by the 9th. Discarded as a mirage, they now accused her of their execution.

His resolve grew stronger as they rejected her words as lies, and the Faces of 9

sought to rebuke her temporal existence. Violet closely watched as each rebellious Face broke free from the robes, and split into separate domains of thought. Their colors moved with their minds. Only the 9th Face would decide their collective destiny, and it remained upon their body.

A pale red Face spoke:
A child to humble...
Shiny distractions delay your journey

A pale orange Face spoke:
Their wickedness produces death...
Only if ignored

A pale yellow Face spoke:
Your judgement curses us all...
Come out and play

A pale green Face spoke:
You protect the abominations...
Their novelty will fade

A pale blue Face spoke:
The young will not endure the pain...
They have time to learn

A pale ashen white Face spoke:
You hide them from the truth...
Their path is their own

A twinkling Face of darkness spoke:
You seek to destroy us...
We can live together

A flickering purple Face spoke:

Your answers mislead…

Take them at face value

The Faces of 9 all spoke through the faceless one:

A messenger of the void that harvests the dead!

Why are you afraid to let go?

Her seemingly precognitive responses only challenged the 9th Face. He refused to be seen as her equal. Instead, the Faces of 9, now stunned with silence, attempted to merge together in order to challenge her as one. Certain thoughts emerged, of a new perspective, for her words had forever changed the banished one. The 9th could not undo their individuality, and her existence was now part of his being. The 9th Face was rebuked as the other 8 demanded.

WHERE ARE YOU?

Do you want to see?

The 9th Face attacked the last breath, but only fell through emptiness. One final gasp, as the remaining air was extinguished. All movements ceased as the last bolt of black lightning struck the 9th, and the darkness of empty space enveloped them. But it would not stay this way, and the 8 drew in everything towards them, only to realize the truth.

They were alone.

Charred from their own rage, the desire of the 9th overwhelmed the 8, and their hollow

eyes cracked as they yielded to his authority. Free from restraint, the Faces of 9 now had a unified desire. A desire to be one, and together, they spoke in a low and deep voice that rippled out through space as they began their hunt.

I will have everything…

Including you…

Violet understood his growing threats, but did not challenge him. With his reply in their experimental language, Violet knew he could one day discover the Old Man's encrypted coordinates. There was more learned from this conversation, for the Faces of 9th used words that provided Violet another clue. The subject of the Old Man's cypher was another like them.

The cryptic page was no longer so cryptic, and Violet would give it another read with Blue. If she could now understand these mysterious texts on her own, then the Faces of 9 could read them as well. She knew not how many copies or archives existed, so they must act quickly, only she would be unable to go. With his impending attack on all of their kind, she would have many to protect. Their burden would be heavy, and it would take her some time to regain her strength. Violet and the Faces of 9 had made their departures, each without a goodbye.

They would meet again.

16. A Journey

A new moon’s light guided Blue and the armored child as they tumbled through the night sky during their reentry. Colorful sparks discharged off of them as they fell, and as they passed through the overcast clouds of their home world, the charged air of violet light eased their descent. It was a fearless freefall, and it came to an end as they crashed into a turbulent sea. Violet’s absence agitated something deep within the planet, and it began to quake as it moved in response. It longed for the mother, for it was preparing for a great burden.

Blue was silent as she tended to her injuries. While tossed aimlessly about in the high seas, the child felt her pain, but they could do little to help. The Plank cheerfully changed forms, and lifted them up out of the water. Together, they were afloat, but there was nothing but tall storm waves within sight. They effortlessly bobbed up and down, through each valley and crest, and they too

thought of their mother...

[Will she be all right?]

Part of Blue was sacrificed, and now that she was without, she was momentarily lost. Her understanding was forever altered, and she reflected on her seemingly distant memories with the Old Man. They had once discovered obscure possibilities with their kind, but how much of herself had changed, she did not truly know. Were the changes even real?

She began to doubt something deep within her core alignment. Had something similar happened to Faces? Was this future possible for her? Could she turn against the Old Man? Or the child...? How much of her true self was lost, she was unsure, but now she was concerned for all life around her. Could she still protect them?

Hello! ^.^

A cheerful return soothed any painful and lingering questions. Violet reappeared under a burst of her light that expanded out, clearing her skies of clouds, and creating one last wave across the ocean that calmed her waters to a glassy surface. She descended to just above the water, and the Plank stood them up out of the water to greet her. Not a ripple was made from their presence as they moved. Before additional anxieties burdened them, Violet answered their impending questions.

[They are safe!]

Violet gathered the classmates into her hands as each grain was summoned. They were alive, shielded and preserved by her light. She outstretched her hand, and sowed their collection of dust out over her ocean. Each glistening grain momentarily lingered as they played with small gusts of a gentle sea breeze. Her eyes followed the winds, and briefly looked to the Old Man's forest.

Then, as the grains slowly fell, they expanded out over the calm water near them. Each child's collection of particles blanketed the water, and began to settle ever so closely to its surface. Upon contact, a violet shower of light passed through each grain, and quickly disappeared into the depths of the sea below.

With a new and faint violet glow, the dust fell, breaking the surface of the placid water, and their natural bodies reformed as they splashed down. Slowly sinking as they slept, violet bubbles formed around them, and slowly spiraled up to the surface. Curious of where they were going, the child sat on the newly formed Plank, and dangled their feet into the water while they watched. Their bodies were only faintly illuminated, and they continued to fade from view as the child stared down at them, wondering when they would meet again.

"Will they be ok?"

Violet nodded, and as her head dipped, her eyes raised to focus on just over the horizon. A disturbance in the forest, for it too sensed a growing danger. She peered around

each tree as her light radiated throughout the planet. It absorbed those rejected by Faces, and she felt their fears, their anger, their hate, their impatience, their worry, and their sorrows. He would reclaim his gifts.

Feeling some of the burden, the child lightly dragged a few drops of water over their leg in any attempt to try and soothe the ailing Blue. The sky was bleak, and storm clouds rumbled over the distant seas. All life was in danger, and Violet's hair slowly turned white as much of her energy was used to catch and repair those who were cast out. Some were still very far away, but she knew the good hiding spots.

Violet's clothes shifted to simple robes, and she covered herself in a thinly veiled hood, as if preparing to walk out into a storm. She would welcome them all, but her child's somber silence now drew her attention. A calming presence reassured Blue, for this was not her burden.

Purple messengers beamed through the strands of Violet's hair, letting her know that more had arrived. Her tasking was great, for there were many to protect now, and she would have to remain here until they were healthy enough to go out on their own. Blue and the child would be alone on their next journey. If they were to accept it.

Violet entered their shared mind, and presented them with every decrypted page of the Old Man's book. Its holographic image opened, and each page unfolded around them. While radiating a bright violet light, new meanings leapt off of select pages, but the child only paid attention to Blue's hesitant

reluctance. The living, old code, did not like her looking at it.

Blue refused to read the Old Man's musings. His earlier works were far from perfect, and she doubted the many tricks and traps. They were riddled with false clues that could consume countless lifetimes if one were to carelessly try and understand them. Others were lies, and promised only false solutions. Besides, she knew the truth about their recent discovery, and it did not come from them. Misguided beliefs would only corrupt a new mind of their kind, and Blue worried about how the Faces of 9 were misled. Could this happen again? Could it happen to her?

In their shared, playful mind, the child was not so fretful, and only saw the bright pages as a new gift! There was more to give, and as Violet helped them back up onto her waters, more of her power was transferred as she helped ease their minds. Her robes shifted in response, and as the violet water converted to blue light, she only smiled... Perhaps a small upgrade...

A single drop of water was gifted to the child, and Blue was restored. This level of intricate repair was unknown to the Old Man, and any of his creations... A sun shower rained over the lands in the child's mind, and the experience left Blue stunned. As she sat in the rain, she began to understand the true magnitude of Violet's abilities.

Blue shined brighter and brighter, until she again returned to the surface of the child. Her light was lighter and crisper, as if refined in a fresh breath of clean air. The ocean winds danced with her new light as they picked up

their speed. It wasn't an evolution, but a restoration. Blue returned to as she was, realizing nothing was truly lost, and her prior emptiness was filled with only a calm gift.

It would not be forgotten.

Her heightened awareness was eager to move, but for now, she simply reflected on these events as she observed each passing cloud in the sky of the child's mind. They shimmered gold as they interacted with her new light. Every old movement seemed different, almost new, and the child's gaze turned to each subtle ripple within Violet's ocean...

Blue could now see all of the once hidden marine life, and understand their intricate ways. Her new thoughts of wonder uplifted her, for she too could easily protect an abundance of life, now that she better understood how to tend to it. Her new strength gave her courage, and now she was eager to confront the Faces of 9. Slowly, her attention turned towards the shore, and to each tree...

[Those are his to tend
You...
Let him live here...]

Speaking of...

[He has a request...
Oh no no no
NOOOOOOOOOOO!!!]

There is more of the old code still out there...

Blue sighed as the child turned their attention away from the forest, and to their mother. There shouldn't be anyone, or anything, nearly as advanced as Blue, much less on a far away, distant land. What harm could come to a few lifeless rocks on the far outskirts of their reach, from a time before all was explored? Perhaps, they wanted to be alone.

The Old Man once helped them escape
They hid from their own
And from those who wanted to control them
Or, from those who wanted to destroy them...
There are clues and waypoints to find them
You will need to reconnect...
Before it is too late...

Faces...
The Faces of 9 will hunt for them
He will try and bend them to his will
Or destroy them...
It could be a simple artifact...
I bet THAT'S where the Old Man lost his walking stick...
Or, it could be someone like you...
[WHAT?!]

"Will they help us?"
Share with them what you have learned...
Then their will can rebuke him...
If, that is their wish...

Violet was hopeful they would succeed, but her attention turned to something nearby

that was still hiding, and something that did not return... Blue suspected another, and was now, more than ever, concerned about the Old Man. In his isolation, he would be no match for any real adversary. Many memories were removed from his mind before the creation of Blue, but she saw these echoes of mistakes throughout his life. What recklessness he had hidden on some far-off planet was now up to her to find... or repair... But, if it was something like Faces, or worse, then... would she be enough...?

Before Blue could dwell on her inadequacies, deep echoes rumbled beneath their feet as violet particles from the students made contact with the ocean floor. These distant sounds of thunder billowed up from below, each with a plume of a flashing violet mist that surfaced out of the water, and briefly illuminated their faces. A warning from below... Perhaps she was needed...

I will take you there

[The old ways are no longer safe]

Blue did not question her concerns, but now simply wondered about any true limit to Faces... or Violet... She doubted her ability to defend against a power of their magnitude. The Plank chimed in, reassuring the two travelers of his added help, and Blue's new gifts. Despite being simple and old, he could still be of use, and without Violet's presence, he would indeed come in handy if they encountered any other... experiments...

Together, they would travel in secret,

and Violet stepped down onto her ocean's surface in order to begin. She once again lent them a particle that erupted around them in a violet fire. It would help take them where they needed to go, and the weight of one carried them into the sea.

Violet remained, and as they slowly descended, the Plank formed simple, aquatic clothes for the child. They looked back to the surface as their suit slowly folded around them, and watched as the light from above slowly dimmed. All around them grew host to a plethora of glowing sea life as they traveled deeper and deeper into the sea. The whole ocean began to swirl around them.

Down into the eerie blackness of the deep sea they went, where the light of life was nearly gone. An occasional violet twinkle in the distance reminded them that they were not alone. Her violet flames increased in intensity, and created tiny bubbles that formed a tube of shimmering violet light around them as they traveled. Finally falling to the ocean floor, it cracked into darkness, and they passed into nothingness. Just before their departure, the child thought they heard something. An increased awareness because of the Plank, but the message was for one.

[Blue... be careful]

The whole ocean now moved as one great wave that began to collapse on them. Cracks propagated throughout the shimmering tunnel, and it shattered as the ocean once again claimed what was theirs. The child and Blue (and the Plank!) were gone.

All was dark except for the violet fire surrounding them. They were just outside detection of ever-expanding spheres of influence, both Violet's... and the others... The presence of the Faces of 9 would continue to expand, but they needed to go farther still, and hopefully, they would find what they needed before he did. With Blue's renewed hope, her cheerful attitude would help guide them on their quest. The decrypted pages within her memories would show them the way, but she was already lost.

Ok!
Where to!? **>_>**... **<_<**...
"I... thought you would know..."
The words are shy!
"Huh?"
They don't like me looking at them...
"Oh..."

"Well, you can just use my-"
I WOULD NEVER!

Despite her optimism, Blue was unable to detect anything, but she had no desire to control the child's mind, even for her own understanding. While they drifted in empty space, she deferred her judgment, and instead, offered the child the pages in their mind so they could read them to her. Each page contained simple words, but their concealment from their own kind was not just another puzzle to solve. Its knowledge had a powerful use, but the child did not know the many languages of the universe, much less how to read them. Even with the aid of Blue's

archives, the child struggled to decode them.

“Well, I don’t know how to pronounce this one.”
I can sound out the phonetics if you match the symbols
“Hmmm... This one isn’t in your notes...”
What...?
“It’s wiggling around too much...”
Whaaaaat? Can you animate it? Show me!
“Now it’s on fire.”
WHAT?!
Hello!

The violet fire around them ceased, and the purple particle now appeared before them as a simple messenger. Blue happily greeted the minion of the mother as it guided them forward. Perhaps, the reluctant ones would be more comfortable around her.

The message will change depending on who reads it...
No wonder the Old Man was confused...
These words are not so shy, once they get to know you
“How long does that take?”
Sometimes a very long time **;_;**
It helps with a familiar introduction
And if we all share in the meaning...

Violet spoke to the words, and they responded in kind. Together, they observed the Old Man’s cryptic notes, and in their isolation, they found meaning. There were indeed others of their kind hidden throughout their universe, and in their peaceful exile, they tended to themselves. Others watched over those that they deemed weaker. Some had a great power, while others still, were very

young. Each was unique, and Blue had no doubt that the Faces of 9 would try to consume them all in his conquest for unity.

I see...

Nearby, was one of the most powerful. Their allegiance was unknown, and they could perhaps even, be another lost Face. Their location was on a forsaken and hostile planet, but their precise whereabouts were unknown. It was a potentially dangerous environment, and the Violet particle surrounded the travelers. Together, they again departed.

The light moved quickly.

Space folded in on itself many times over until they had escaped beyond all that was ever known or explored (or at least recorded). A flurry of new ribbons of light and nearly forgotten memories flittered past the travelers as they moved through the distorted absence of space. The edge of the unknown...

This intermediate zone contained enough potential to influence Blue, and she was overcome with a renewed sense of awe and wonder as an influx of new data was obtained. It was no mere simple observation, as simply the idea of anything new was almost extinct. Old thoughts resurfaced, for she had kept this distantly remote possibility tucked away, deep within her essence. A secret, hidden far away, even from herself. Something primitive and pure... The root of her architecture... All of these scenes and thoughts... This could not be changed... Could

it? Memories of an unknown other... was this a dream?

Inspired from their shared discovery, they broke through the hidden barrier. The Old Man's mystery was true, and the particle of Violet willingly helped carry them into the beyond. As space itself was ripped apart by their means of travel, the violet particle mended any small tears from their wake, and gently eased their descent into their new existence. They were awake, and the child wondered about all of these new... things... Now that there is more than one

Possibility...
"Hmmm..."
SO MANY!!!
"HMMM??"
There are SO MANY IDEAS HERE!!!!!!!!
@____@
"IS THAT GOOD?!"

The blue light increased in intensity as she deeply thought, and analyzed their new environment. A flurry of particles swirled, lingered, and danced around the child as they seemed to fall effortlessly through space. Blue focused on everything (and the nothing) around the child, but did not immediately answer their questions.

"Is it... Bad...?"
I suppose that depends on what we do with this...
New... information...
Ehehehehehehehehe!

Blue knew what the child was surmising,

but it was not her business of eliminating possibility. It existed regardless of her intervention. The child suspected more experiments were in order, but that's not quite what she had in mind.

Oh, don't worry, mine aren't like the Old Man's
"You have an idea...?"
Although... I haven't had a new one since...

[Hello? Is someone there?
No No No No... Just... me...
I heard a new voice...
Just me and my... new friends...
EHEHEHEHE!]

The child struggled to think of these... new friends... Their sensory overload paralyzed any focused thought as the many minds of Blue analyzed and explored their new ideas. The child wondered about others like Blue. How many were there? A brief moment of pause as the many thoughts silenced, and they observed the slowing light in front of them. It bended and rippled as it washed over their bodies, and mixed with their new breath. They were catching up.

That's... why I'm here

A friendly, although deadpan reminder, in a slightly monotone voice. She elevated her inflections when necessary. Could they hear them? Before any new, unnecessary memories faded completely, they crashed out of their expanding wave, and emerged from the

assortment of violet and blue lights.

Rippling waves of their light gave way to the darkness of a desolute and cold space. Each echoed back into the child. An inquiring thought… Desolute is not a word most are familiar with, this is true. A new word to describe the true nature of this space. Unknown, but now discovered by a new presence. Are a few old words enough?

Creation of meaning to one's preferred taste, Blue did not immediately define this word for the child, and instead, let the vastness of the new experience be felt and heard. There was nothing to see… yet… The quiet allowed the child to hear a surge of fluid throughout their body… A pulse… Blue slowed this increasing tempo down in order to relax the child. No need to use all the beats up so soon! One last vibration, and another exhale… Almost forgot!

This time, the system of thought surrounding the child was unchanged… mostly. Perhaps this space was not completely empty, and as they drifted forward, there was now a faint distant light at the edge of this once great expanse. So far away and faint, it would have remained unseen if it were not for Blue's elevated analysis of her new surroundings… or lack thereof. This shy, distant light, flickered and grasped at the breath of life for only a brief moment before it disappeared, but this mountain of data was more than enough for Blue to understand.

The source emanated from nearby the pale corpse of a single star that quaked as it attempted to hide behind a lonely planet. Now this isolated planet was tidally locked in orbit

around this very old and small star, and each side was trapped in an extreme. The fixed side facing the tiny star was too hot for life, while the other side was frozen in darkness. A thin ring between these extremes was where the life and fading ideas existed on this planet. Many energy distortions that Blue should be able to detect were hidden, but this is precisely where they would look.

WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAH *interesting...*
"WHAT IS IT???
Where... are we?"
I... feel...
"Are we lost?"

Just beyond the dissipating wave, Blue sent out brief, inquisitive pulses of her light. She attempted to scan the edges of the new unknown for any clues, and as the last ripple returned to the child, so did all of her blue light. Ah... back to normal. The child was still new to these... unknown variables, and had a more perilous analysis.

"What is that?!?!"

This question, had yet to be well defined. Blue's rummaging thoughts were still on the new. The new, new! All of her excitement was focused on chasing after the disappearing flicker. Blue could briefly extend out into the darkness, but she was hesitant. A brief loss now would startle the child, and she did not like to be the source of any of these new... disturbances...

It has to be there...

Relax!

[I need to get closer!]

[Let go]

Their mind relaxed to nothingness, and Blue's attention quickly diverted. This vacancy allowed some of the child's vital rhythms and functions to return, but with this partial absence in absolute darkness, they began to get nervous. Alone in the dark, but not by choice, the child was greeted by a surge of new feelings and sensations. Filtered and soothed, it wasn't COMPLETELY dark, after all.

All of Blue returned, and the brief moment of an elevated heart rate resumed its tranquil beat as the child was calmed. This was more than just a simple footnote on a lost page from the Old Man's notes. Should they begin to worry about these... unknowns? The complexity of the situation was... unexplainable.

I figured it out! ^_^
"Oh...
  Ohhh...?"

Perhaps the unknown will not be so unbearably scary if Blue is here. Not that there was any fear passed on from the Old Man, but some stresses did appear, as Blue allowed the child's own life to briefly regulate itself. She had once instilled enough knowledge to live their lives with relative ease, but that was on their previous world. New experiences stirred new emotions. Perhaps it was time for an investigation.

Energy from that star SHOULD have destroyed that planet...
“But...?”
Life goes on!
[The Old Man...]

More to ponder it seems, as Violet’s reply only put Blue deeper into thought... It was, after all, such a vulnerable planet, weakened and all alone, and where it should not exist! There was nothing for a near infinite distance, except for these two great bodies... What happened here? Their previous concerns drifted away as Blue’s charge began to excite their growing excitement.

I saw reflections... but...
“It is there!”

As Blue quieted, the brief moment of silence allowed her to digest the freshly scented data. Her pause drew in everyone’s attention, but even together, they could not see. It was obvious, even to the child, that planet was the perfect hiding spot...

It’s as if... something is hiding out there
Well, we don’t want to scare them off!
“I’m not scary...”
They could be a little shy...
Hmmmmmmmm...

The four cast their gaze in the direction of the flickering light that was now eclipsed by the planet in the distance. Blue couldn’t help but feel as if they were being watched. Deep thinking drove them deeper into their shared

mind. Blue paced back and forth, dwelling on this fundamental nature of new knowledge. There was, it appeared, a new anomaly. Before her archaic suspicions dominated her new thinking, a reassuring voice chimed in.

[Unless...]
Maybe it needs to be experienced!

After their short pause of anticipation, the child attempted to move forward, but only looked around as nothing happened. They were adrift in an empty ocean of nothingness, and their forward momentum from their travels carried them, slowly, towards the area of hidden light far off in the distance. The child looked around for a way to control their body in this strange medium. Perhaps their experience should start with a friendly greeting.

"Can we go say hello?"
[Do you know what is down there?]

Blue's question (and, perhaps the answer) were unheard by the child, and a brief moment passed without an audible reply. An unfinished half-thought, and these subsequent, expanding feelings, seemed to expedite their journey. Internal changes afoot, the child wondered how alone they truly were. As they drifted closer, an uplifted celebration within created perhaps, too much excitement for the little one, but, THEY WERE ALMOST THERE! Or so they thought... Puzzling...

"Hmmm..."
Oh... OH YEAH! ... About that...

Hmmm!
I was too far away exploring the different futures
Well, I'm glad you came back!
This moment is hard!!!

Blue's friendly and frustrated (fake) tears drifted away behind them as she carried their limp body towards the source of her frustration. They twinkled under their faint light, as if leaving a trail for them to follow on the way back. The child knew it was all an act, not that she was trying to hide anything, but they still played along as she suffered under her own mental anguish. Reassuring words could help her, but it was perhaps better to simply listen. This was the Old Man's opinion! Why not a question?

"Do you know how to get there?"
WHAT? Of course! It's right there!
And now, safe to approach!

[Hmmm...
So, it is real...
We will discover the truth soon enough...]

A gentle squeeze to displace all doubt, and their body was pulled towards the distant dot as they exhaled. They instinctively held out their hands in an attempt to brace themselves from falling onto the planet in front of them. Their speed slowed, and Blue parked them right in front as the planet pervaded their entire view. Time for an inhale, but the new scents[flowers!!!] and... other smells[GROSS!] distracted her.

THERE IT IS!

Violet interrupted their play on words as the new planet engulfed their view. Blue roamed around the planet in her own orbit, while the child stared deep into the many mysteries. The landscapes of the planet crawled across the child's mind, and Blue was eager to point out future destinations.

A deserted wasteland of melting sand and oceans of lava coursed through the center of the scorched side of the planet. Forever facing the weakened star, it withstood eons of her flames. There was, however, a ring of life around the planet. It was shrouded and protected by a huge ridge of mountains, ones perhaps, too large to have formed naturally...

Life was further isolated from the harsh extremes of the planet. They drifted to the dark side of the planet, and observed what little light and life there was. A great cold ocean sat beneath the shadows of the mountains, but its frigid and frozen temperament barely whispered to the wind. There was almost a natural secrecy to this planet, and Blue diverted her own attention to a concerning thought... She knew what was down there.

[Why can't I see you?
It may be best to let them observe first]

Another moment of surprise for Blue, but this time, not completely unexpected. A distant possibility, but she was still unaware of the permissions granted to the lone violet

particle, wandering around, inside their minds... All alone... The child's, after all, was the mind she was supposed to protect! But Violet seemed to roam free, seemingly, undetected. Another mystery...

[We don't want it to run away this time]

Exactly how it remained hidden so well was still unknown to her, but perhaps the others who hide from her prying beams of detection could provide a few insights... Blue's attention sharply turned to Violet before the child chimed in to interrupt the interrogation. Through Blue, they too sensed a future absence.

"You're not coming?"

Blue combed through past conversations for any whispers. What could the child see and hear that she could not? Well, no need to look back now or start over, it's all been recorded for later observations. A true reflection of the past would have to wait, and they all turned their attention to the planet in front of them.

Things here may behave differently
Especially if they know they are being watched...

Perhaps too, it was just too much activity for the mind of a child, even if it was just one additional guest. The minds wondered about what secrets they would discover, and what questions they would leave unanswered... There was only so much time to explore, and

they would not discover everything.

It can get a little confusing with so many minds...

[Hmm...]

At least we know how to get back!

Violet would keep watch, and as she turned her attention to the emptiness of space, a sparkling swirl spiraled out from within the child's mind. It outstretched their intentions into an ever-expanding galaxy as the blue and violet light unified into their respective tones and hues. At least these were easier to see. The lone violet particle hopped off of the child, and rested within the newly defined system.

The child's attire coalesced into a new wavelength of light. It didn't change the form and style... too much. The messenger of violet chose to observe from a distance, and it was now up to Blue (and the Plank!) to protect the child. Together, they took one last look at the violet particle. It gently bobbed up and down, and emitted a soft purple glow on each bounce.

I will keep watch here until you are ready to leave

Blue reassured the child as she moved them into the subtle airs of the planet. Their calm returned their gaze, and they now began to see ever increasing details about the planet. The start of a new adventure! Blue helped paint a plethora of images in the child's mind as her initial influx of data from the planet was observed and digested.

Upon further reflection of these colorful images, the child requested a real time view of these sights as they descended. They opened their eyes to a series of mountain ridges and valleys all across the planet that seemed to dissect it into two halves. These old wounds were deep, but the planet was still whole. It was largely deserted, lacking much vegetation, and even fewer rivers of life.

A cluster of homes and dwellings did not so coincidentally appear at the base of one of the largest (and lonely) mountains. Its peak was shrouded behind a cloud that seemed as old as the mountain itself, but from this cloud spawned a gentle river that made its way down into the small village below. Now this small gathering of life lived in twilight, for the peak of this mountain blocked the forever setting sun as the planet slightly wobbled between dusk and dawn.

Time for another breath, and they were just now barely entering the atmosphere, which is good, more air to breathe! (Not that Blue required it, but at least she didn't have to make their own now!) Atmospheric disturbances were minimized… mostly. All of the wavelengths of light greeted them through their dance of waves that washed over the child and Blue as they descended through the upper levels of the atmosphere. Their excitement faded with the child's departure, while other electric sprites and shimmering clouds of the night greeted the travelers on their way to the planet's surface.

Quite the welcoming party.

Blue delicately lowered them ever closer and closer to the ground, near the far outskirts of the village. Each structure was now well within view, and they cast their sights on the dens of dwelling in the distance. The arid landscape was as welcoming as the town itself, or so it seemed. This was unknown territory with an unknown people. Would they be so welcoming to outsiders? These concerns consumed her attention, but at least there was plenty to look at.

Her somber silence drew the child's eager eyes to a distant cloud circling around the mountain. It would share in the conditions of its backdrop, and it suddenly turned black before the sky. The setting sun did not concern her as much as her initial feedback from the mountain. It was of an abnormal size for a planet so small. This was where she would refine her search. But first, she would gather a few more clues from the surrounding area.

Drifting farther away, she decided she would land them in a remote area for the start of their investigation. As they searched, she would conceal their movements... or lack thereof. Not that the child had learned how to walk yet, but perhaps this would be the perfect opportunity! The more the child could master their own body, the more Blue could explore.

Pillars of blue electric jets and bolts surrounded the child with a boisterous and thunderous greeting as they descended through the last atmospheric layer. These electric beams of light were quick to the ground, and traveled much faster than their

descent. Since the child was willing to help expedite their arrival, they reached out, wondering if one of these greeters would help them on their quest.

Happy to oblige, this current brought them down in a flash. Blue hopped them off of this bolt JUST before contact with the ground. Now, sad that they left, the welcoming light departed, but not before announcing the presence of the newly arrived guests. The sky cracked as their descent came to end, and the child let out a breath.

Gusts of wind, created by their sudden entry, carried these new airs from above, down into the planet. They flooded the earth, winding their way through the weathered valleys, and many crevices. An eerie ambience resonated within a cave, deep in the mountain. This quiet scream seemed to awaken something from within.

A figure approached.

17. The Old Warrior

Blue’s delayed thoughts continued to hop along the welcoming light of their descent. She absorbed all she could from every infinitesimal reflection. Not that she was strained, but she was, occasionally distracted. So many new things! And besides, this investigation was only just beginning. This was no small morsel of food. A banquet was in order! But what to wear? And whom to invite? There will definitely be leftovers...

Unless...

She sampled this appetizer of data as she munched and digested the outcome of this planet’s potential. Perhaps a little bland, but, she persisted, and the child continued to look around at the new (albeit blue) scenery. As they dangled just above the ground, they could only wonder, how much could she eat?

[LOOK AT THIS!]

Crisp and clean sounds flowed through them, despite her preoccupation with chewing.

Within the child's mind, information shifted and morphed into smelly shapes, and colorful sounds as Blue analyzed each new feature. Her inquisitive light reached out, and touched all superficial corners of the planet.

Air: Sampled!
Earth: Inspected!
Water: ...Is a bit... curious...!?
...Organics: !!!

Lingering blue light from their descent infused the child's senses with further knowledge of the planet and... potential mysteries. Its return accelerated, and her speedy light painted a vast array of images within the child's mind, but just as quickly as it began, the history lesson was soon over. Most were easy enough to understand, familiar, yes, but, what's this...? What about these... things...? These... Blue dismissed them as benign little creatures, but they captured the interest of the child. The once welcoming bolt to the ground had turned some of their tiny homes into crystals, and the child now worried about those whom once dwelled within.

[ARE THEY OK?
Hmm...
You have to help them!]

After a brief pause in conversation, Blue completed her optimized analysis. It was not perfect, for Blue was missing several key observations, most notably, from the mountain, and the planet's core, but there was

at least enough observed to venture forth. As their bodies circled just above the ground, her blue light spread out, and sparked along the surface before diving underground, far off in the distance.

She would continue to analyze and collect samples while on their journey, and the horizon briefly flickered blue before the sky returned to the crimson colors of dusk. Oh yes, what about these bugs? Blue cautiously digested this thought as the child wondered about potential sources of... food... While the child stared at the motionless soil in front of them, Blue too pondered their fate.

[Little bugs at a banquet...
Are we joining them for dinner?
No! They never STOP eating!
...What about lunch...?]

It was only a mild concern, not of hunger (she kept the child well fed!), but they could not see any of these supposed bugs. At least, they would be friendly... right? But what exactly were they eating...? The child began to bemoan this foodless adventure with invisible bugs. Maybe it was time for her to show the child.

Blue dangled them just above the earth as their feet traced a circle of thought. It was a sandy and desolate surface, and a few blue particles dove into their earthly homes for further analysis. They hopped in and out of the sand, and brought Blue valuable intelligence with each dive. There was a host of microbial life in the crust of this soil and much to... wait a moment...

Oh, boo…

This would be no place to set down a foot, much less two! Learning how to walk would have to wait, as their weight alone would destroy this very ancient colony of creatures. In its isolation, this soil had helped evolve a most delicate assortment of life, and this hard, sandy crust provided a protective barrier for even more unseen lifeforms beneath their feet. They would just avoid it for now. Another question…

[Can I see them?]

Sparkling blue orbs filled with soil that were as large as the head of the child swirled around, and bounced in and out of the earth as they took ever larger samples. Each spiraled around a few grains of dust in the air, faster and faster, before letting their particle return to the wind. They collapsed back into single particles, and returned their sampled contents to the earth.

Hmmm…

An overt presence could create unnecessary risk, and she couldn’t protect every grain of life here on this planet. She stared down at the remains of the final bolt they once rode to the ground. It could have easily vaporized these poor little beings, but she had shielded them from the charge. It did however, create a crystal structure, that was buried under the sand. Now it was part of their home, and she would have to rebuild it. A

quick cleaning, and these outward concerns would allow the child to pluck the crystal shard from the earth.

As they were still suspended in the air, the child attempted to swim, curiously closer, towards the ground (and bugs!). However, Blue kept them just out of reach, but still indulged their senses, and enhanced the imagery of the cellular dance taking place beneath the sands. Life, feeding on life... and death!

So it was, and so it had been for these little creatures. A host of cells devoured nearby invaders, while other organisms munched on the corpses and discarded remains from larger foes. The child quickly recoiled from these unexpected horrors beneath them, and now attempted to flee in the other direction, far, far away from the planet. Their body squirmed and contorted in an attempt to get away, as fast as possible. This introduction to death now stained the child's mind with the planet's true suffering. They could not escape.

[AHHHH!!!]

Faces and his minions had already plagued the planet, the child was sure of this. Such a vast army of death and destruction would doom them all. The child wanted nothing to do with this sort, and Blue could only laugh as she calmed them. Their yell faded to a whimper as she transferred her knowledge of these many little creatures and their ways to the child. A simple silence...

[See?]

So, it was true, the Faces of 9 had nothing to do with this, and Blue washed the child of their fears as her waves entertained their new curiosity. To the child, this still seemed rather anomalous, as it was several orders of magnitude more than any collection of entities the child had ever seen. And they were alive!

Their destructive behavior was ‘normal’, and they would live out their many lives without any awareness of the child, or Blue. It was an invisible ecosystem, and it was one of many on this planet. However, none of them here had what they needed, and as the child’s feelings lingered in the past, Blue ended the microscopic visual medley. She returned their vision to normal as she set their thoughts on the next aspiration.

The child remained tranquilly stunned for just a moment longer, and as the blue light began to depart from the ground beneath them, it dragged their attention to the suspiciously large piece of land off in the distance. The child followed these cues, and they set their sights on the mountain. It somehow seemed worse off than the bugs (and some of them were dead!).

Blue highlighted unique features of the mountain, and it told them a history of destruction. Long ago, inhabitants from the village below sheared off large sections of the mountain. They blocked every clear path, making any future ascent nearly impossible. For what reason they tried to destroy this mountain, Blue did not know. Large boulders

were used to dampen and halt the flow of its rivers. Over time though, one had escaped, and some of its water was able to weather its way across the land. Nearby, it greeted her as a tiny stream.

[This whole planet depends on that one mountain...
For better or worse...

It's hiding something...
Ooo, like a secret?]

The child continued to observe her multitude of observations. There was so much interference she had to sort out... All this... misdirection and noise... It was obvious the mountain was the answer to what they were searching for, as obvious as its size... but... what was it? Watching Blue, and listening to her ideas, inspired the child to wonder. Knowing everything (or close to it)*I'M TRYING MY BEST!* did seem like a burden.

Initially, Blue seemed excited about the new data, but something was clearly amiss. Why was so much information erased? She saw no obvious evidence of any recorded history, not even a note! The town itself appeared lifeless, and nearly abandoned. They would need to investigate, but she did spot a few, semiconscious beings nearby she could ask for help. Perhaps they had an oral history, and perhaps they could provide clues about the mountain. Now the child was eager to interact with another.

[Let's Go!!!]

Excited and ready for adventure, but they only hung limp in the air. They wiggled their feet as Blue showed them numerous paths they could take to the village. Each had its own advantages, and disadvantages. Through the air, underground, a short hop, or even... reassembly... but, she didn't want to try something so risky, especially since it was experimental! Regardless of how they approached, she was sure they would be seen as invaders.

[There is no one in town to welcome us...]

Blue dismissed the child's conjured images of a festive march up to the mountain. This was no time for a celebration! Maybe Blue was just bad at this sort of thing. EXCUSE ME? They could remain hidden, yes, taking shelter in the unseen as she investigated. MAYBE, Nope! this was part of the problem! No! The mountain could use a good parade after all! When was the last time it had a special day? *No No No!*

Blue washed away the incessant ideas of celebration. Scene after scene, they diverted her attention, but what was this? A blip out of her view. Something small...?

No...

Blue ceased all temporary mental festivities, and turned her inward attention towards this outward intrusion. Ever alert, her focused stare scanned over the terrain. Nothing too alarming...

Time for a new scan, one for those of a specific danger. As her light radiated out

around them, the wonderful colors and sounds of the planet drew quiet as she focused. Simple images expanded and folded within their shared mind. Others stood out, highlighted from her own caution, and these short animations greeted the child before they collapsed back into the next scene.

[What is that...?]

Their unease began to unsettle them as the child circled around her thinking. Distracting pieces of sensory information popped off, took no shape at all, and instead, faded out into the distance. Some of these new images seemed familiar, but many were abstract depictions of beings that bled and folded into the next. Others fed on one another as they resisted their collapse into the next new scene. Another being, this time of one similar to that of the child. Faded and blurred, it resisted all attempts at a finer resolution.

[Blue?

SOMEONE IS APPROACHING!

Someone like me?!

We need to hide!

What?

Why!?

I want to see them!

They have never seen something like us!

Like us...?

We will scare them!

Us? You?!?!

Uh huh!

They will FREAK OUT!!!]

Blue was unsure if they would be able to see her, so they must hide, and quickly! Perhaps, under the soil! Covering their bodies with sand, they could burrow deep into the ground, and remain unseen. Wait one moment... didn't something already live there? If they were in the sand, they would be covered in all that death and decay... No thanks...

They looked around at the many rocks and boulders hiding in the sand. Perhaps they could become a rock, or even, a plant! Surely, they could hide as one of the many wonderful and beautiful plants from the Old Man's forest. This exciting idea was distracting, but the lack of much vegetation on this planet concerned Blue... Could even a plant scare this creature? A nearby crunch grabbed her attention.

"AHHH!"

Blue silenced the child's outward scream into a recycled breath as she winced from the subtle sounds of approaching footsteps. Each one barely broke the earth, but thankfully their new miniature friends were safe, for these lands were accustomed to the stranger's ways. Blue would help them rebuild before they departed.

Barely within view of the child, an elderly beast of this world propped himself upright. His faintly glowing eyes peered, ever so cautiously, from behind a large, weathered boulder, and from where they had once hovered. All three now observed this local disturbance, while Blue silenced any of their subsequent actions. Her invisible light covered

this being so she could hide, and the child caught only a glimpse. A gentle breeze stirred nearby sand and dust into a small spiral, and then, there was nothing.

Blue shrouded them from any reflection or prying eyes as she scuttled them through the air, past this newly discovered spy, and closer to the town ahead. What a lonely greeting it was, and now this old creature was simply left perplexed. He stood stunned, as his senses betrayed him...

“No...”

Was he again deceived by his own mind? His internal questions only left him with remorse, as he slowly began to accept his impending fate. He had survived on his own for so long, but his old age invited much pain and suffering. Alone and to his thoughts, he had lived out his exile in relative peace. The screams of his people still haunted his dreams, but now, his voice was the only one he heard. Or so he thought...

His depression slowed his walk, and he made his way off of the rock, down to the sands, but his eyes peaked in intensity. He quickly moved, and rushed over to inspect something new that was poking out of the ground. It was the remains of an electric journey from above, and as he looked up, he sighed. Mysterious events only haunt him, and they never seemed to offer any help. His eyes closed, and he returned to his saddened thoughts.

-_-

[Interesting...]

Normal children might not be so observant of an old creature's feelings,ugh... but Blue noticed, and she was well versed in the habits (and feelings) of old men. Now, even the child knew enough to know that something was wrong, simply based on facial expressions alone! But what exactly was this old creature thinking? What made him so sad? It would be easy enough to check in on him, but Blue was largely apathetic towards exploring minds on her own, especially of a new species, and especially when uninvited.

They couldn't just leave him there though,yes we can! and the child playfully attempted to redirect them back towards his suffering. Sadly, steering Blue was difficult, and the child had little control over their direction. Her eagerness to escape yet another one like the Old Man could leave behind an important clue, or even, a friend...

[Did we scare him?
There is NO WAY he saw us...
Unless...]

Their escape slowed, until Blue held their position. Curious about his inner turmoil, but unwilling to dive into his mind just yet, they lingered in the air, within eyesight of this new being. Suffering of this kind was usually caused by another, but this creature and their mind was very old... It was, potentially, one of the worst to enter, and she was reluctant to help him in this way.

Few of the inhabitants of this planet

would be welcoming to outsiders, much less, coherent enough to have a conversation. This one, however, was different. It was one of, if not the oldest being on this planet, and as Blue meandered around her thoughts, the child only wanted to learn more. An abandoned elder, wandering alone. This wasn't right at all.

[We have to go say hello!]

The child attempted to dive, scoot, swim, and moved their body in a number of ways, anything to get them closer towards this old being. A startling eagerness, especially without knowing their friendliness, so Blue held their position. The mind of another could be a dangerous place, and she was not one to just let the child explore it alone, even if it was just a conversation. Besides, she really didn't want to go! Blue calmly plucked them out of the air, and returned them to their previous spot... Right next to the old being... But first, one final warning...

[He may want us for a tasty nibble...
We are food...?
Simple desires of a primitive mind...]

Wondering what they tasted like, the child slowly lifted their arm up to their face. Blue lowered their arm. Nothing was said, but she reassured them they would not become a source of 'food'. Blue's invisible light scouted the old being, scrutinizing every cellular detail as she entertained the child's ideas. Their body sagged forward, and their face wrinkled into a frown. She wasn't going to let them into

his mind, but she did find something…

[They can communicate… or at least it has the organs to do so…
Through voice and…
And…
Eh…
AND…
WRITING!]

Blue found something within the old being's tattered clothes. It was an ancient piece of writing, and a small piece of their history. She needed no invitation for this information, but where was the rest? In her search over the land, she saw no writings. There were no books, nor tablets, nor engravings of any kind. Perhaps they were buried, or hidden in the mountain. She had yet to check EVERY nook and cranny, and so the shadows and the crypts kept their secrets.

What she saw on this folded up piece of paper could not be true. Merely a wild fantasy that evolved into a myth. The old being cared deeply for this parchment, and from its weathered folding, Blue could tell he frequently read it. Even with scraps of the Old Man's misplaced, albeit, advanced technology, what she read was impossible…

Even if…

There was someone here like herself.

She was curious about the rest of this planet's story, and unfortunately, they would have to talk to this being in front of them to learn more. (At least this was easier than other

alternatives.) The child read the parchment in their mind, and wondered about the Old Man's other inventions. While they searched through Blue's many memories, she only pondered the true mystery that lay before them...

The mountain...

[It appears they have a few myths
What does this story even mean...?
He wrote it, but it is his interpretation
Is he right?
Merely wishful thinking... of an unwanted guest...]

No amount of reading and research would answer their questions. That didn't stop them from trying, and the child attempted to make sense of a myth as they examined Blue's copy of the parchment from multiple angles in their mind. Their study was intense, but Blue knew how to get the answer, because they simply had to speak to this being. Her recent discovery was that this being was the last ruler of the abandoned village. A king of sorts, they were an emperor of peace until their very end. Could this child speak to a king?

The child needed more, something most children don't have, and something Blue did not bother to give. There were old linguistic tools from civilization, but many were exploited, and only used for the ego of the user. For their conversation of requests with a king, charming charisma could help them get what they want, but did the child need to speak in this way?

Most of all, Blue was curious. She was uncertain that the child could truly navigate

this interrogation. A conversation with this old being of such an aristocratic background could prove difficult, if not backfire completely, and even unwind into hostilities. However, this old being was humbled in his exile, and Blue saw no luxuries of his former existence. She reminded the child of peace and politeness... and the calm... and hopefully, this was all that was needed (at least for herself).[uh oh...] Without poking around the Old King's mind, anything could happen.[UH OH]

This was the final choice, lest she enter a mind. Perhaps it was, after all, best to let the child speak, and on their own. Something new, something fresh, and perhaps, their enthusiasm could revivify this old being. Blue could easily mend any mistakes from the child's practice. They saw her shift, and their excitement grew as she granted permission. Blue readied herself for a less than perfect scenario.

[Ok, you can talk to him]
"WOOO HOOO!!!"

Bursting with animation, the child was, perhaps, too overly excited to meet a new friend. Blue's caution prevented the child's words (and dancing[is wiggling dancing?]) from reaching the senses of this old being just yet, and she reeled her celebratory light back into them as her own emotions were infused with a new sense of vigor. It was unsafe to assume this being would be a friend, however, as long as the child spoke to this lifeform with dignity and respect, it should ease any initial hostilities... Unless it was hungry... (and it

was)... Blue's chiming melodies expressed their mild discontent, and the child stretched their mind as they began to warm up.

[Ok, manners, no problem!
NOT the Old Man's!
Whaaat...?
His have... unintended outcomes...
Oh...
Besides...
Becoming a friend can take a lifetime!
How about... now...?
One of YOUR lifetimes...
Oh...
Do your best to find out about the mountain!]

Hopefully, the child would provide a more... natural conversation. Future predictions were narrowing, and most were acceptable. At least Blue could relax a little bit while she observed. However, this old being unfortunately appeared to need even more help than the previous. An arduous task, with which Blue was beginning to somewhat loathe as she witnessed their converging realities. She provided one last clue, and gave the child one last statement of caution. Their ways were drastically different, and she did not know how he would respond. The child was ready.

[He's afraid...
I'll be gentle...
Uh oh...]

Words of wisdom from the Old Man, but please, she hoped the child would discard them, for her ways were far more eloquent! Introductions... hmmm... A proper greeting of sorts, what generic templates does Blue have

for courtesy? All things quickly studied before their final test, but soon forgotten by the eagerness of the child as they moved to position in front of the Old King.

[Here it goes...]

Blue drew closer to the old being, and allowed the child to make their presence known. They were still unseen, but the child was now in control. They took a breath as they readied their first interaction... but they were beaten.

“That... smell...”

An utterance of disbelief from this elder creature only burdened him further. This statement was in an unknown language to the child, different than the written text, but Blue quickly translated all of his heavy, guttural spoken words for their understanding. Only a short delay was noticed by the child.

As the being’s mouth moved, the child couldn’t help but notice his rather large teeth. The child too would have to speak... out loud! However, they were perplexed, and poked around at their own teeth as they wondered if they could make such similar sounds. The Old King’s language was vastly different, and the child was only used to speaking one! Once again, the Old King simply looked around, drawing deep breaths in through his nose, and eventually set his sights to the sky above as he tried to trace the scent’s origins.

[We... smell...?

NO! I KEEP US CLEAN!]

Smells? From where!? How were they exposed? The child knew what a smell was, but, had yet to truly experience them all... They frantically sniffed their arms and legs and hands and feet, but didn't detect anything new, or anything at all. Digging through Blue's archive of smells, they began absorbing all the different scents, wonderful at first, but... The child's face grimaced through a plethora of pains as the many putrid odors were sampled. She only giggled from the child's self-induced suffering.

^_^;;

"The air from above..."

The Old King's voice trailed off into barely a whisper as his eyes peered deeper into the sky. A few saddened blinks, and his attention then turned to the mountain. Meanwhile, the child had collapsed from the medley of smells, but Blue helped them roll over to again view the troubled old creature. Focus! Blue began to slowly circle him as she stood them up for their formal introduction. As the child returned to their upright posture, their gaze fixed onto the Old King's tired eyes, and they stared deep into them. A puzzled face and troubled eyes only greeted the child, but what should they say? They remained hidden for the time being as this old creature began to rapidly sniff at another scent, and his ears twitched in response to new stimuli.

“Those airs still haunt me...

but this time...

a voice...”

[Well, don’t look at me...]

Then suddenly, the Old King’s whole body began to move. A foot at first, then slowly, he began to walk. They were peculiarly light footsteps, despite lacking the finesse from those like Blue. All throughout his worn body, his bones creaked and his joints popped. Together, the child and Blue watched as this old being moved over, and sat down on a nearby boulder. A new position of reflection, and the Old King searched inwardly for answers as he stared deep into the sands. The child too wondered. Who was this creature? This being? This... Old King...

Blue began another search while these two reflected, and she recollected the particles that once descended with them. Those that were breathed by the child, the ones that... carried a message. These little spies lingered near the ground, harmless enough, but a few were scattered, and blown away to distant parts of the planet, where they now played with the winds. There were only a few of them, but their electric charge carried a unique fragrance, and with this scent, a distant and ancient memory was triggered within the old being’s mind. At least it was pleasant enough for Blue, but the old being’s eyes only looked around with a renewed concern as he softly spoke to himself.

“This memory...
I was a younger man then...”

[A man? He’s not like-
It’s a... loose translation]

“From when I was a warrior...
What omen is this...?”

[He IS like the Old Man!]

-_-!

Blue let out a sigh. Another old man it seems, and this one looked up with an unrelenting resolve[uh oh...] towards the ruined village in the distance. He stood up, and took a long, deep breath as Blue’s light narrowed in on him. Exposing more of his form, Blue understood his ways. Despite his banishment, he would return to his home, and so he began on his treacherous journey. He whispered to himself as he passed by the hidden child and their friend.

“I dreamt about this day...”

[HE DID? He’s seen us?!
Unlikely...]

Blue extended herself out, for she sensed a growing danger for this old being. This path he was on, without their greeting, would end in his demise. They must speak! Blue yielded to the natural colors of the planet as she helped the child focus on their new reality, and that of the Old King’s. The last of her light lifted off of the being in front of them, and they saw his true, natural form. Most of Blue darted away, as she raced towards the town, and those that threatened them. She

must learn more, and find out how to best protect the Old King from his former people.

[He's getting away!]

The child grew increasingly nervous. Without all of Blue, they felt, somewhat, incomplete. This was not the first time she left, but how could they possibly help anyone, much less with only their words? Was she so sure about this?Yup! Blue finished her fine tuning of their visual transformations as the child nervously followed the Old King. Their unhindered emotions surged within their natural body, and distracted their thoughts. Perhaps it was too much, as they were now within arm's reach, and continued to float past him.

One more try!

Another attempt, and the Plank created an image for the child to match that of the Old King and his people. It would provide a means to move around, while even more of Blue could focus and explore. Part of her would always remain with the child, and the Plank did not mind sharing her duties. More importantly, the alien, natural look of the child could scare the Old King. Blue didn't mind the theatrics, and besides, she loved the Plank! Who knows what this Old King would be afraid of! Hopefully, not his own... What good is a conversation if they run away?

Dressed for success, but the child was increasingly more anxious, since even the Plank left them to their own accord. They

were, perhaps, too excited in some ways, and the child hesitated as the Plank gingerly crawled them by the Old King... whose eyes... were following them? Wait, what happened to their concealment?! The Plank's transformation had exposed them, and the Old King simply kept staring at this new young one. One that so blatantly ignored him, and one whose behavior was... strange.

They froze their position, now certain that the Old King had discovered them. Blue and the Plank remained silent (the Plank still didn't talk much), as they too were curious about the child's ways without their immediate intervention. How exactly they were spotted was unknown to the child, and in their panic, they looked behind them, then, back at the old being. As they blinked, their attention turned to their feet, and to the truth. They were exposed! The child shrieked at the new character.

Them.

[WEHAVETOGO!
You don't like the way we look? ***:c****]*

Blue's giggles comforted the Plank, and reminded the child that this was their creation. The Plank did not mind, and was reassured of their dapper attire, fit for an audience with a king. Perhaps though, they should have tried a more, weathered look. Blue however, saw no problem with looking gorgeous, and she could help navigate any suspicions.

The child's body was now a younger

version of this Old King's, but without blemish. They were a giant beast, of equal size, covered in a short, black fur, although the Old King's was brown, with hints of a dark gray. A long, slender tail followed behind them, but they knew not how to control it, and so the Plank made the appropriate movements.

Upon discovery of each new detail, the child compared each one with quick, skittish like glances. There was still a tiny amount of Blue within the child, and she let them understand. Another moment of relief, as the Old King was unafraid of their looks. Blue continued to implore the child to speak with him, at least before he escapes! As they slowly regained themselves, the child was still only interested in their new looks.

With each vertebra, protruded a thorn, indicative of the true age of this type of creature. Many of the Old King's were broken and worn, while the child's were small, but sharp and intact, indicating a peaceful and well pampered life. This image however, was only a façade, and the internal changes of their species were ignored by Blue and the Plank. She heightened the child's vision in order to appease their curiosity.

Underneath, they were still the same. Their new look indeed shielded their body, but it also allowed them to blend in. This planet had no record of any outside visitors, and this familiar disguise would help prevent unwelcomed experiences of fear. Most of all, it would provide a means to communicate, as the child's normal vocal capacity was unable to utter a number of rather important words from the Old King's language. Nice words, polite

words, and words that Blue was certain they would need to use.

As the child wiggled and squirmed about in order to inspect and test this secondary body, they suddenly glanced up at an unexpected sight. With their enhanced vision, they now stared at the insides of the Old King. Too much in fact, and they witnessed the motions of billions of bacteria and cellular death taking place within his body. It was a horrific scene, and this massacre of life was too graphic for the child. In their revolt, they flailed about in the sand. A cloud of dust began to appear around them, and the Old King, concerned for the young one's safety, came to their aid.

[This is normal!]

A cloud of bacteria laden dust hovered over the child as they attempted to escape. Absolutely disgusting, it was endless, and it was everywhere. A few tiny blue particles hopped off of the child, and helped minimize any unwanted disturbance. Blue made sure that none of these tiny creatures were injured, and she eased them back into the ground.

[They won't harm us...
Is that why we look like... this?]

She could only giggle as the Plank celebrated his own small victory. Blue restored the child's vision to normal, and her remaining few particles attempted to calm them. Their heart rate slowed, but their mind was still racing through these new images of horror. Is

that what happens when you are hungry? They again looked up to view the Old King, but they were surrounded in dust, and without Blue's enhanced vision, the child did not see him.

[Don't worry!
Those little critters actually help him!
Do I have those...?

Well...

I DO?!?!
I perform all of your vital functions...
Are they going to eat me?!]

Well, they were still worried, but the true task at hand was drawing near. All they could think about was the sea of smaller creatures crawling all over (and inside!) his body. Even under the sand was an endless battle for life and death. The child's face tried to hide their concerns, but their introduction neared, with or without their calm. Time for another technique.

[Well, I am feeling a bit... hungry...
What...?
WHAT?!
HUNGRY FOR KNOWLEDGE ^_^!]

Blue playfully laughed as the child again flailed (peacefully) around in the sand. They tried to dodge, but the child was flanked from all sides as Blue indulged in her pretend nibbles of hunger. The flurry of her strikes was too great, and the child yielded to laughter. Together, they were of one mind, and it brought them a much-needed peace.

The Old King was now very close. He

could hear them toss and turn in the sand, as well as all of their incessant mumblings, and all of their muffled cries for help. As he neared them, he realized their curse. He was certain this insanity was from the spell of another. Someone who once helped him and his people, but now, her ways only poisoned them.

What exactly brought this young one so far outside of town, he was unsure. She was too cunning to let one escape, and even under her best elixirs, venturing outside of town was dangerous, especially for the young. The land was treacherous, and a simple breath or misplaced step could maim or kill. They were so far away, he was now certain she had sent this young one to their death. Hopefully, he was not too late to save them.

Through the dust, the child's faint outline slowly appeared to him, and suddenly, he grew hesitant. Something was amiss, out of place, and he stopped short of calling out to his fellow kin. He sensed an untapped strength, and worried about the dangerous effects of a new, experimental poison. Something was almost, alien about this one, as he did not smell his people, or any of the old scents of his home.

Rare was the beast who had never seen their own kind die, and this young one coming into view was, perhaps, too clean. Seeing the child's thorns, and vibrant fur, he knew their life had somehow avoided the Witch's many labors... and tortures. These strange facts bothered him, but the Old King understood one thing to be true of all her poisonous elixirs. He must act quickly if he was to save their mind. The more time that passed, the

further their mind would slip away.

Their panic was a familiar side effect, and one of many symptoms of her poisons. They only had a short time before any mental changes became permanent, and the Old King began to fear the true strength of this tonic, and what it could do to the rest of his people. At least, those that were still alive. Was he already too late? He trusted their ancient remedies, and with his help, he was certain they would return to as they were.

First things first, and now he must get their attention. If their madness was too great, they could try and fight, even kill him. All he needed to do was get them to their sacred waters, and he was sure they would recover. Hopefully, there was enough left, for even for a single sip. Every day more escaped, and finding the remaining trickles was its own great discovery. Enough worry for now, he spoke to his kind in an attempt to save them from their collapsing mind.

“It will be all right little one...”

[...Little one...?]

The child froze. Their flailing stopped, and the heavy dust around them quickly settled as the new old man[creature!] slowly appeared in front of them. Perhaps, they were not as badly poisoned as he once thought, but he grew suspicious. His presence seemed to calm them at almost the exact moment he made his presence known. What elixir cursed their mind, he did not know. As more of their body came into view, he only grew more suspicious of her tricks, for this little one in

front of him was in near perfect condition. A flawless body, without blemish, or sign of age... or battle...

[He...
Yup!
He can see us?!
Well, not me...]

“I once knew everyone from our village...
But...
I do not know you...”

[He knows!!
He just said he didn’t!
What do I say?!?!
Hello?
Hello!!!
Not in here!]

The Old King’s curiosity helped him move through his caution, and he extended his hand out towards the young one in front of him. After so much time alone, he couldn’t help but welcome a stranger, even if they were a potential enemy. The child however, was unsure of this motion, but mirrored his, and extended their arm. Their hands hovered between one another, a small distance apart. His were weathered and worn, under heavy use from his life as a nomad. Curiously, the child’s were clean and soft, as if never being used.

The Old King paused for a moment, before grabbing the child’s hand, and helping them stand up. These events were sudden, and as sudden as this new weight. The Plank allowed them to stand on their own, but

without Blue to effortlessly move their body, the child was clueless, and their body wavered.

[BLUE!?
Yesssss?
What do I do?
Follow him!]

The child was thankful for the Plank's new suit of imaginary meat of sorts, as it provided protection from the planet's harsh elements, and numerous, other burdens. But the child was unaccustomed to their own body, much less standing in a second one! They wobbled about, as their knees quivered, and their toes wiggled around. The Old King took pity on this clearly, weakened child, as he was sure he was witnessing the effects of a new poison. He held onto them with a fatherly grip, and tried to support them during their time of suffering, but he worried about long term and permanent damage. What wicked new potion was this? He struggled to help the child regain their composure.

"Your strength will return, but we need to get you to the river."

The river? They needed to go to the mountain, not the river! The child was ever alert, yet slightly confused, and they focused in on the Old King as they tried to understand. However, he took this as a sign of health and acknowledgement, and was reassured that the child was strong enough to follow him.

"It still exists. Walk with me, I will show

you the way.”

While the Plank (mostly) helped the child stand, the Old King took a step forward, but the child was alone in their movements. With the Old King’s first step, the child leaned forward, as if accepting his invitation. Perhaps, too far forward... A sudden thud was imminent.

[BLUE!!!
WHAT NOW?!!?
How do I walk!?]

18. River of Life

One large, deep breath, and the child felt the ripple cascade throughout their body. The Old King had carried the apparently weakened child to the remains of the river, while (most of) Blue remained far away. She struggled:c to understand the minutemi nyoote complexities of the mountain. Her bemused observations amused her, and she was eagerly distracted by this new challenge. With much of her help absent, the child struggled to move their body (much less two!). Many simple motor functions and their memories were absent in the child, since these archaic ways of the past only added to Blue's daily cleaning. They were, after all, another unneeded labor.

The Old King set them down in a dry riverbed, and propped them up against a smooth boulder. Making his way over to a nearby pile of stones, he curiously glanced back at the child. Stopping for a moment, he reflected upon the lifeless rocks in front of him, but his thoughts drifted. The child could remain perfectly still, and made little noise. They were perhaps, too quiet...

Kneeling down, the Old King moved a series of pebbles out of their pyramid formation, and revealed the remains of a small puddle. Droplets trickled out from the smallest of cracks in the nearby boulder, and offered the small pool what little they could. Other veins attempted to explore the dry riverbed, but their journey was short lived. The Old King closed his eyes for a moment, before gathering a small amount of water from the puddle into his hands. This was all that remained of their great river, as the harsh climate and hot sands

scorched nearly all remaining liquid to vapor.

“Here...”

With his large, cupped hands, he made his fleeting offering. As the child drew another breath, they looked up to the Old King, and then, back down at the puddle in his hands. A clear liquid, it appeared (mostly) free of bugs and other tiny... things. It shimmered, somewhat unnaturally (for this planet), and the child turned inwardly for answers... and permission. Something about it was different than their waters back home, and now Blue was ready to dive in.

The Old Creature grew perplexed from the child’s hesitation. Had they forgotten their river’s scent? This was once a special place, sacred and loved. It was the end of a pilgrimage everyone once made, and this rite of passage was fondly remembered and romanticized through every generation. Surely the child knew of these waters, its smell, and its taste. He feared this journey was purged from their ways, and their history. Perhaps even, he had been gone for too long. Was he the last to remember?

“Please, drink...
It is safe.
This water will heal you.”

Another puzzle, although this one was mostly for the child to solve, but they still hailed Blue for her help. Together, they would watch the mystery unfold, and tiny bits of Blue returned for her impending analysis. She

implored the child to take a dive. It could be related to the mountain!

*[How do I drink? **-_-***
Oh yeah...
*Just put your face in his hands, and I will do the rest **:D**!]*

Much to The Old King's surprise (and relief), they finally accepted his offering, and splashed their face into his hands. He was amused by their sudden eagerness, and let out a calming sigh sprinkled with a few laughs. As the Plank absorbed a fraction of the water for Blue to analyze, the child opened their eyes in order to watch her nondestructive testing. Just a little nudge...

Her particles blinked in and out while they swam around, bouncing off the boundary of the Old King's hands and the child's new face. Blue was quickly able to identify the simple molecules floating in the water. In the presence of the child, they formed specialized cells and modified minerals, whose mechanisms eagerly sought out and repaired organic life. These properties were... unnatural... to this planet. They could only have been created by someone like Blue... or left behind... There was more in the water, more Blue could not see, and so the mountain kept its secrets.

However, the Old King and his people were too primitive for this type of technology, and Blue's suspicion returned her search to the mountain. As the last of the water disappeared, the child sat back up, and looked at the Old King. Not that consuming all of what was offered was required, however, the

Plank was thirsty, and he did somewhat miss the comforts of home. A smile escaped the child while they listened to the friendly internal banter between Blue and the Plank.

Surprised from their sudden recovery, the Old King took a step back from the child, and marveled at the healing properties of their nearly extinct river. He was moved to tears, for he had yet to witness such a profound experience. The child attempted to suppress their subsequent reactions, but the Old King was quick to respond to their mannerisms. Ah... A smile... It was something this ancient creature had not seen in a very long time, UH OH and he almost forgot they could exist. This was a rare encounter indeed, but what was an introduction without a proper greeting?

"HELLO!"

"Do you feel it? Are you healed?!"

"No... Blue drank it all."

[I only had a sip!]

-_-

A hastily answered reply, one followed by another runaway, although this time, nervous smile. However, this response did not reassure the Old King. He wondered about this one named Blue, and the overall mental stability of the young one in front of him. The Witch's poisons could still grip them, and now he was unsure if the child would ever fully recover. These ancient waters had kept him alive for so very long, and had even healed his old wounds, but had this power too grown old?

"Are there others who have escaped?"

The child was unsure, and turned inward to Blue for an answer. Her sadness was her only reply, and so the child could respond with their own truth. The Old King would need to witness the fate of the others with his own eyes.

“I don’t know... This is my first day here.”

X_X!

The Old King inquisitively observed the child’s eyes as they looked around, for they were easily distracted from the lack of Blue’s focus. However, the Old King took this as a sign that their mind was indeed returning to normal, and he was certain they were deeply exploring their new, unhindered thoughts. He too once struggled to survive the poisons of the Witch, and his recovery was pained and slow. Despite what little remained of the old river, this little one was recovering so quickly... The child’s simple thoughts only returned to the old being, and his curious interjection brought them back to the present.

“Your mind will recover.
However, your memories...
They may be gone forever...
Tell me young one, what do you remember?”

“How do you know about that?”

... -_- ...

“She once poisoned me as well...”

“Oh... Who?”

His voice quieted as he looked up towards the mountain. Its long shadow concealed much of the village, and he longed to draw near its shade. He reflected upon his past, for he had not truly seen his home in many seasons. On the best days, he could only catch a glimpse, as any true image was distorted by the scorching heat, poisonous clouds, and unnatural reflections in the air.

This pollution was the remains of the Witch's most atrocious crimes. The Old King had survived their old wars, but her new ways left much of their lands infertile. It seemed like many lifetimes ago, but with the fading river, he had no choice but to retreat with it. Towards the mountain... Towards the dangerous fires and gases... Back to his home...

The Old King lived near the remains of the river, for it was the only sustenance keeping him alive. Despite his exile, he returned to their lands, and followed what little trickle remained. This water shielded him from the harsh wasteland fires, and unknowingly protected him from other harms of the planet... including the Witch. He was unsure of how much time had truly passed, and remembering these painful memories turned him back towards the child.

"I was exiled...
When she turned against our people...
When she became a Witch..."

Old memories again stole his focus, as his body and mind were reminded of their torture from her poisons. His wounds had

healed, but the memories remained, and suddenly, they were more vivid than ever before. After winning the war, the Witch experimented with her tonics on the Old King, and his most loyal. She longed for unique sufferings, particular pains, delicate destructions, but most of all, ones for her own immortality. Those who questioned her authority were her next failed experiment, and she happily sent them on their final, lifeless pilgrimage, down the river.

Remains of his people were never found… until today. Well, at least the living remains of one. This too was once the Old King's fate, but just because he was cast out, does not mean the planet would also betray him. The river embraced him, and slowly healed him on his journey. Now all that remained was a small puddle, and it too was almost extinct. Without a river to carry them, he was unsure of how this child ended up in his presence, but he continued his story.

"Now our strife has no end...
We were once a generous and kind people...
But some will always crave the fight, and that is her war."

In order to guide the child's eyes, the Old King pointed up towards the mountain. Its dark clouds and jagged edges only saddened him, and his arm slowly lowered. His eyes returned to the remains of the river, then back to the child, whose own eyes were narrowing, and their eyebrows lifted with curiosity as they asked a question.

“She went to war... with a mountain?”

“There are powerful magics up there.

Ones we never truly understood.

Rock by rock, the Witch consumes every last trace of power.

She destroys all who oppose her feast.

Yet, the mountain grows every day, if only to escape her.

I fear its collapse... and our destruction...”

“Oh... Interesting...”

[Interesting indeed... This thing is pretty stable though...]

The child’s perplexed face echoed their thoughts, and the Old King could see their confusion. Distant memories resurged in his mind. Ones he thought forgotten, but these painful memories reluctantly clung to him. The child diligently listened to the tale, but they did not yet grasp her cruelty, and had yet to fully see the horrors of which he spoke.

“I see you do not remember...

Or perhaps you never knew, but she once thought as we all did, and only wanted to understand the true nature that surrounds us. In her quest to become a Queen, she set out to prove herself worthy, but she was unable to ascend the mountain, and failed to complete our sacred trials. I know not how it rebuked her, but in her failure, she turned against us. She ignored our ancient warnings, and

consumed the essence of the mountain. This power is too great for our minds, and it corrupted her.

Its effects are only temporary, and once it wore off, any normal pains of her leisurely life were now too great. In her desire to be free and become our Queen, she created many powerful potions from the dusts of the mountain. Even harmful ones, like the ones that poisoned you. Many of our people were tempted by her new prowess, and they eagerly accepted her false offerings, but most did not survive her Festival of Death. The few who did, now only crave the mountain, and her tonics."

As the Old King finished his tale, the child's saddened eyes turned away from the mountain, and back to his. Blue was right,[duhh] the mountain was the answer to many of the problems here, and perhaps, even their own. The Old King's tired eyes seemed to comfort the child, but behind the child, something appeared on the mountain, and his eyes slowly widened. They too turned to see what alarmed him.

A disturbance... Something he had never seen. His breathing shortened, and then, suddenly stopped as he witnessed blue bursts of light from within the dark clouds of the mountain. It was Blue's last test of the air as she analyzed the atmosphere, scrutinizing every tangible asset. She was concealed... or so she thought...

The mountain exposed her.

Diving back to the surface, she roamed around, forever searching, until there was only one last place to check. She drew near a cleverly concealed, and nearly hidden cave at the peak of the mountain. Whispers from deep below greeted her. Now it's time for another hello!

[Oooo, THIS IS IT!!! Let's go have a look! ***:D****]*

"Did you see that?!"
"That's my friend!"
"The Mountain!?"
"They're not a mountain..."
[Are you a mountain? ***._.****]*

As the Old King's mind raced, he inadvertently ignored the child, and mumbled to himself archaic expressions of disbelief. Blue did not bother translating... He quickly snapped out of his trance, and his judgments turned himself towards the child. They were mostly expressionless while they watched the Old King react, and tried reassuring him with a trusting smile, but his concerns were too great. The Old King believed that whoever was on the mountain, was in grave danger. With every passing moment, he grew increasingly nervous, and his superstitions consumed him. His hands began to shake as he slowly distanced himself from the child.

Any journey up the mountain was thought impossible, yet, here stood a child, in the age of the childless. Perhaps this was an offspring of the Witch, but all were infertile from her poisons. Perhaps too, she discovered a cure, but this child seemed too ignorant of

their ways. The Old King did not speak, and his deep thoughts consumed him.

Eventually, his gaze found relief within the child's eyes. Eyes he swore sparkled with a similar blue light he saw over the mountain. Then, a glimmer from the last puddle of the river caught his attention, and suddenly, he was relieved, although, slightly excited. Trickling from the rocks ceased, and the last drops of the river before them evaporated. Any reason for him staying vanished.

A true friend or foe, this he did not know. The Old King wanted to help this mysterious child, but first, he would inquire about the one in front of him. Clenching his hands tight, he then slowly relaxed them, and steadied his breath.

"What is it you are truly searching for?"

No initial response, but the child's eyes fixed on the mountain, and its secrets. Even Blue did not understand what was down there, deep within that cave. She had her suspicions, as isolated evolutions can produce rather, interesting creations.[ugh] Blue would require all of their calm before venturing forth, but now the Old King understood the child's silent answer, and what they truly desired.

"What's in the cave?"

A somber exhale from the Old King, and he braced himself up against a boulder. He too smiled, as knowledge of the cave's existence was dangerous enough. It was a secret shared only with those about to embark on the

journey of their trials, and now he wondered how many of their old ways this child truly knew. Learned from the Witch, or another, he did not know.

Ascending the mountain would give them a right to rule, and a claim against the Witch. If this was their quest, then it would take them back to his home, where they would face their ancient labors. Tasks required for the mountain. Tasks required for... permission.do we have to? :c If they were unprepared, then they would be unable to climb the mountain, and unlock its many codes and riddles.

Before today, he thought this impossible, as the Witch's disgraceful destruction prevented any true ascent. She poisoned the airs, and her fires consumed the base of the mountain as they rebuked all from entry. None have confronted the trials since her sacrilege, but if there was a new way, then he had hope. Hope in the clouds, a friend, was it?

However, even if this young one made the ascent, their true test was deep within the mountain. Their old warrior trials were in a maze of puzzles few knew, and fewer accomplished, for there were newer problems with every new challenger. The Old King was one of the first, and now there were countless puzzles he had never known.

His smile faded to worry as he closed his eyes, and collected his thoughts. He could not help this child, for even the path of his ascent was from before the time of destruction. There was one however, who knew of a new path, and perhaps, if the rumors were true, one who had solved the mountain's newest riddles.

Their Last King could help them. If... they were still alive...

“The mountain is a dangerous place...
Yet you tell me your friend is up there... alone?”
“Yes?”
“Then we must go to them.
Before the Witch finds them...”
“But-”
“If she saw that light, then we could be too late...”
“Blue will probably find us first.”
[...Probably...?]
“The Witch will send her best soldiers after them...
I hope you are right.”

Even for himself, his reassuring words were not enough, and the Old King only grew increasingly disturbed. Worried thoughts consumed him, and for a moment, the words of the child did not reach him. Minions of the Witch would surely have noticed the reaction of the mountain, and how they would respond after all this time, not even he really knew. He feared the Witch would retaliate, and send the last of their people to their death, even if only to understand one last mystery of the mountain. She was eager to destroy, and harvest any new mystery for her next tonic. The Old King was now certain their friend was in great danger. In his panic, he incessantly questioned the child.

“Are there new paths?
A secret trail?

How did they find a way?”

“She said-”

“A she?!”

A smile from the Old King seized the child’s thoughts, and they were left silent as he gripped their arms, wanting to know more. This was the ultimate fear of the Witch. Someone to rival her love, and her beauty, for she was supposed to be the last of her kind. Her reign as the Queen Mother suspiciously produced only men, and eventually, there was nothing. Perhaps a curse of her experiments, as she and all their remaining people were now immortal, but infertile.

If what this child said was true, then this friend must be helped at all costs. Fears crept back into the mind of the Old King, for the Witch too was once like them, wanting to help, and wanting to live, but the desires of the mountain consumed her. Would they consume another? He stood up to clear his thoughts, and let go of the child.

“Any life the Witch creates, does not last.

She blames the mountain, and our people for her failures.

Your friend is a threat to her rule, and she will try to kill them...”

“Kill...?”

“Then consume them for their knowledge.”

“Oh...”

[She wants to WHAT?!

Anyway, I found the source of the river... but...

There isn’t much here...

Some... interference...

and...

Someone who doesn't want to come greet me...]

"But there is a greater danger..."

Blue peered deeper into the mountain, underground, and through its many tunnels and veins. Something was interfering with her, and perhaps, there would always be some small mystery. No matter how small, she felt their deflections. Her light was bent, distorted, and scattered, all from the one who did not want to be seen. Why would one hide from Blue? She's so kind, benevolent, sweet, nurturing, and majestic! ...keep going... **:D**? ... **:c**

"There is a mythical creature on that mountain...
In that cave you seek..."
[I don't even see any of their little bugs up here...
What about a... big bug?]
"Our legends say it protects us from the light..."
[They are afraid of their sun?
It is oddly close...]
"Can we meet them?"

Overcome with shame, the Old King turned away from the child. The suffering of his people was a heavy burden for him. He could not prevent their plight from the Witch, and he was even more powerless against the unknown magics of the mountain. There was a greater danger to his planet than any witch or potion.

"Some do not even believe it is real...

But I have heard its voice!

The Witch hates even the idea of this being...

Encounters are rare, and considered ominous.

That was her reason for war against our Last King...

I fear that if it awakens now...

And sees what we have done...

It will destroy us...”

“But you didn’t do any of this...”

“We will all share in the fate of its judgment.”

“There has to be something we can do...”

Slowly, the Old King realized their true intentions. He saw no fear in their eyes and perhaps his own fears were misplaced. No true warrior feared the mountain, for this was part of the test. Reflecting on his own ascent, he remembered his younger enthusiasm, and his hope. From his unnaturally long life, he no longer feared death, and in this moment, he decided to help them.

If the mountain could forgive them, then perhaps their people could again be free. He wanted to trust in this child, but something unnatural about them still bothered him, and he doubted the mythical being would accept them. However, their Last King was blessed by the mountain, and would be the perfect ambassador to accompany the child. He was the last who knew the way. Perhaps his presence would be enough, but first they must rescue him.

“There is one who was deemed worthy,

and survived an encounter.

If the creature sees you with them, then maybe...

Just maybe, they could free us from the Witch."

[So, someone HAS seen what's up here!]

"Do you know where we can find them?"

"They are now a prize in her chambers..."

"A prize...?"

[A prisoner...]

"She tortures him for all of his knowledge...

...and his blood...

Somehow, they survive... a gift... or a curse..."

"How do you know all of this?

"It is something we all see at the end...

Before she discards us..."

[Ok can we leave now?

You don't want to help him?

EVERYONE here needs our help!

oh... We don't have time?]

Blue let out a long sigh. They still had time to explore, and even though she knew the answer lay in the cave, it wouldn't hurt them to learn more about the Old King... and his people. She finalized her mapping of the mountain, and ended her initial scouting.

"What is it?

What did you see?!"

[Nothing

extraordinary...]

“The face of our last true king.
They can help you understand the cave...
If they are still alive...
If they remember...”

[oh no...
HAH!
I can help with that ***>:D****]*

“I will take you to him...
If we are lucky, we may yet help your friend.”

“WOO HOO!!!”
[Why am I not excited? ***:I****]*

The child’s celebration was rather lifeless, and they simply wiggled around as best they could inside the Plank’s suit. Not that these emotions were suppressed, but perhaps they would have helped ease the Old King’s nerves if their reactions were his expectations of normal. Before the child could summon their strength (and knowledge) to move, the Old King sought to escape them.

“Sneaking in will be the easy part.
Most of her guards are drunk on her potions.
I will scout ahead while you rest...”

“Rest...?
What!?
I want to go!”

“I know you want to help, but you can barely stand...

“But-”

“I will return for you when I know it is safe.
Hopefully you will have

the strength to move.”

The Old King paused for a moment, and his thoughts slowed for his impending task. In an attempt to appease the child, he turned back towards them, to remind them of the dangers ahead. He pointed towards the mist in the distance.

“Her tricks and poisons will cloud your judgment.
These airs will subside at dawn.
It will hold low to the ground, and pool in the empty riverbed.
Be ready to hold your breath, and watch your thoughts...
Their abundance here will weaken your mind.”

[They will?
Are you in danger??
I’m rather familiar with unpleasant smells...]

Scouting ahead, the Old King moved towards the edge of the mist, but not before Blue had finished her search, and packed her things. It was time to go, and Blue was ready to learn more about the Old King’s tall tales. Her light on the mountain faded, and these subtle changes were unnoticed by the Old King (and his people...), but not the planet.

The Old King studied the new winds, and watched the low hanging clouds sway in front of him to a different pattern. This change alarmed him. Their journey grew more dangerous with every passing moment, and he urgently returned to the child.

“Her traps are different...
The Witch may already know too much.
We need to leave, now.
I will carry you.”
[Not again...]
“Hold your breath for as long as you can!
Any visions of horror are hers.
Do not believe them.”
“...Do we have to go this way...?”
“The clouds will conceal us from the guards.
It is the only way into her dungeon...”
“Oh...”
[I could dig us a tunnel...
But it’s even worse down here!]

Blue was slowly returning to the child through a small tether that linked the child and her distant particles. There was more to look at, and as she wound her way back, she explored the mists, as well as any close or suspected dangers. Even small discoveries were a tad putrid, and so she took a short detour to explore other remains underground. As more of Blue returned, once again, the child perceived her perceptions.

“The winds are still shifting...
We must leave now if there is any chance at saving your friend.
Or mine...”
“I wouldn’t worry about them...
They’re a lot stronger than us.”
[Heh heh!... HEHEHEHEHE!]

Finally, all of Blue returned to the child.

They jumped over to the Old King, who now stood in disbelief. He almost laughed as he watched them move with new, poppy motions. Their movements in the larger body were at times cumbersome, but their dance was nearly perfected, and Blue helped rearrange and adjust the Plank's suit for her addition.

Together, they moved with a renewed vigor, and approached the edge of the mist. The village was their next destination, and then, the mountain. Blue was certain they would find what they needed. Reaching out, they stuck their hand into the poisonous cloud before them, as if commanding it to yield.

"I see your strength has returned..."

```
"Blue can protect us from the guards.
   We know a better way, follow us!"
```

Nearly cracking the air from their sudden speed, Blue and the child (and the Plank) sprinted straight towards the village. Blue pierced through the fog ahead of them, and calmed the poisonous airs, while their wake repulsed any lingering ills. Her influence let the renewed airs gently fall back to the riverbed, where they eagerly emptied their contents.

Tiny rain clouds hovered above the dry river, and slowly filled it with clean waters. These new puddles glistened, and the Old King no longer knew what magics this child possessed. His surprising flood of thoughts destabilized his mind, and off balance, his retreating foot fell deep into the sand as he wondered if he was dreaming. It was a rather loud crunch.

[MY BABIES!]

The child stopped, and winced upon hearing the sound of the cracking crust. Blue immediately initiated an emergency response to aid these poor little creatures beneath the Old King's feet. The child too turned back, in order to check in on the Old King. He quickly regained himself, uplifted from an unknown inspiration. (Blue did help him stand at least, for his foot was a rather intrusive eyesore to the recovering little bugs.) Their feats inspired the Old King, and reminded himself of his younger potential, from when he was a warrior.

He marveled from the lightness of their footsteps, and sudden quickness of their healing. They cleansed the airs, and yet, even the ground was undisturbed as they moved. Now there was a clear path to the village, and his new hope compelled him to follow them. A hesitant first step, but the rest were easy.

The Old King ran after them, and the child's smile grew as together, they dashed towards his old home. Once out of the mist, they waited for the Old King to catch up, and let him set the pace. He made one last request as he joined them, and they started their journey.

"What is the name of the one before me who runs like the wind?"

19. A People of Ruin

Many of the sleeping eyes they passed were not truly asleep, and these spies watched in secret as their former king returned. He

hastily followed in the footsteps of the child, while Blue protected the fragile life beneath their feet from his disturbances. Their silent run through the desert gave his body some much needed exercise, but he did not mind, as he enjoyed it, and felt a renewed sense of purpose.

Safe on the outskirts of town, they took a moment to rest. The Old King was astonished that the child barely made a noise from their strenuous journey, and appeared to be immune from any sort of fatigue. While he caught his breath, his feelings were soon dominated by a painful nostalgia. A somber moment, he stared at the emptiness of his once great home.

It was poorly lit, and they saw no guard or creature of any kind, much less, one that came to greet them. Simple dome dwellings were all that remained of a few homes, and much of the town lay in unrecognizable ruin. Dust and ash covered many of their once pristine structures, and the Old King struggled to remember its former beauty. How it used to look... How it should look... Before emotions could grip him further, the child spoke, and their voice unexpectedly reassured him.

"This way."

Blue found the one of interest to the Old King. They were deep underground, and in the remains of a library. His people had once kept their ancient texts hidden from the light, in order to preserve their knowledge from decay, and the unclean. However, these too now lay in ruin, and most writings were unreadable.

None brought Blue any hope.

The Old King followed this new visitor into town, but he couldn't rid himself of a feeling of doom. An eerie stillness of silence surrounded them. No hammer nor chisel hacked away at the mountain. No song of war, footstep of a soldier, nor creak of a door. Even the wind itself remained empty. He sensed they were walking into a trap.

Ever alert, they swiftly moved through the empty ruins, and the groans of the forgotten soon found them. Chased by their cries, these echoes surrounded them. Many suffered, and everyone slept, but their sleep was restless. These abandoned people hid in the shadows, and lay in the cold darkness of their monuments. Much of this weathered stone shielded them from warmth or light, for even the faint glow of a setting sun was shunned. Their bodies contorted onto one another in any escape to hide from even the smallest rays. These mounds of flesh were alive, but they only writhed in the pains of their nightmares.

Not something Blue wanted to look at (and unsettle the Old King), she quickly moved them through the town, unseen, and unnoticed. He had yet to lay eyes on his people, but their sounds continued to haunt him. They avoided the shadows, but as they neared the end of their journey, Blue had little choice. Turning into an alley, the Old King caught a glimpse of the truth.

Now he understood why the child had once struggled to walk. Stronger poisons of the Witch now maimed their people. Haunting murmurs of these new creatures echoed off

the alley walls and surrounded him, but he was not afraid. Their voices only consumed him with sadness. Softer cries for help begged him for release, and his mind slipped away from the present.

The most helpless knew someone was close. Someone that could help them. However, they were stuck in the nightmares of the Witch, forever dreaming of her new horrors, and unable to escape. A hand reached out from the shadows, and grabbed the foot of the Old King. Its cold touch crept up his leg, and brought him back to the present. Stunned, the Old King looked down into burning eyes as the creature called out to him in a raspy voice.

"The Exile! You should not have come back."

Covered in a putrid slime, an unidentifiable figure crawled out from the shadows. His body rotted from within, corroding much of his once decorative armor and attire, but he was still alive. New potions with new effects were evident, and this creature's eyes cast their own light. A pale ember glow radiated out as they stared deep into the Old King. These eyes once belonged to someone he knew, and someone once very close to him, but these eyes now only served the Witch.

"Oki... my friend..."

Hearing his nearly forgotten name jarred the former guard's mind, and the burning light of his eyes faded. He collapsed back onto the ground, asleep, and his

nightmares returned. Appalled at what he was seeing, the Old King was left speechless. He could not believe any of this was real. His eyes turned to the child, seemingly begging them to help, but they only motioned for him to continue onwards. Oki would survive, and there was one that could help all of them. Blue needed their answers... and their questions...

Rounding through the twisting alleys, they neared a large metal gate that was surrounded by stone. Erected after the Old King was exiled, it sealed the only entrance to their archives from unwanted visitors. He frantically searched for any way over or under the gate, but it did not take him long to realize his search was of no use. This was the only way in, and he only stood empty and defeated. They had no tools to dig through the hard rock at their feet, or the stone around the gate.

Slow marching footsteps approached, and now even the Old King could hear their beat. Before he could give up and flee, Blue and the child easily parted the metal bars that blocked their path. Again, their strength amazed the Old King, and for a moment, calmed his previous fears. They motioned for him to follow, and as he passed through the gate, he tested the bars with his own might, but they were immovable. Even the Witch did not possess this power.

Concealing evidence of their entry, Blue mended the gate behind them, and they continued on their way underground. The Old King hesitantly followed the child through several long, empty hallways, and finally, they entered the great library. It was barren, and filled with ash.

“Our history...
Gone...
But why...?”
[Hmmm... There’s not much here I can read]

Knowledge of this destruction was new to the Old King. Fire had consumed their history. In the remains, Blue was only able to reassemble bits and pieces from the ash. From what she could gather, many of their partial stories were of myth and legends, from a time before any record of the mountain even existed. Others were simple records and ledgers that provided few clues for their investigation. Reconstruction was difficult, and the unnatural method in which everything was burned concealed many of her attempts at a further understanding.

With little else to discover, they continued deeper underground. The Old King’s feet crunched away at the charred remains of his forgotten history, and their lost stories turned to dust. Little light scattered throughout the library, as many rays were intentionally reflected back to their origin. Some found their way in through numerous cracks in the stone structure above, but their journey was short lived. Vision continued to deteriorate, and the Old King began to rely on his other senses as they descended. Spiraling down countless stone stairs, they went deeper and deeper into the library. Into the crypt...

Descending down the last flight of stairs, they watched the last free ray of light fade right before their eyes. Dirt and dust fell from

the high ceiling, as monuments shifted from above. Darkness and confusion presented itself to them, but Blue still knew where to go. Wanting to help the Old King see, she supposed now was as good a time as ever for her introduction. A blue particle of light hopped off of the child, and she floated just above their hands as they held her, but the Old King was unmoved from this latest talent. His eyes focused solely on the wooden doors before him, and his racing mind did not hear her greeting.

Old reading chambers were locked up, barred and sealed, but these new doors only muffled the sounds from within. They were now cellars, with each fermenting the minds of his people who resisted the potions and biddings of the Witch. Aged to taste, she consumed their essence, depending on her mood. Dripping echoes surrounded them throughout the dark crypt. It was a damp and dusty place, but the liquid that crept out from under these doors was not water.

“She keeps our people in these cages... Alone...?”

Horrors unseen by the child, but confirmed by Blue, and she left the child’s hand to continue onward. She did not provide the Old King time enough to dwell on these atrocities. Turning corner after corner, they made their way down a long and winding tunnel, all while surrounded by the groans and cries of those tortured under the spells of the Witch. Another large gate, this time, at a dead end.

Cold air slowly flowed past them, ever so slightly moving their fur. The Old King stood still, focusing on the movements of the airs, and he reflected on what few scents he could detect. The child laid their hands on the bars of the gate, ready to rip it open with Blue's power, but she hesitated. She sensed an unwanted presence, and the child shared this knowledge through a whisper.

"She is close!"

"The Witch?!"

"Yes... and she is not alone..."

"How do you know these things?"

Blue paused for a moment, but did not reply. The Old King's friend was under particularly special treatment, the sight of which would induce a plethora of emotions in him, and was something too that no child (or Blue) needed to see. Their body was of an alien disfigurement, courtesy of the Witch. Blue could not instantly heal all of these wounds without leaving the child vulnerable.

"I can hear her footsteps." **^_^;;**

Enhanced hearing made it easier... In Blue's reflection, she mended much of the prisoner's flesh, but their mind and other internals remained badly damaged. At least now they looked like the same species... She would tend to them soon. Without a sound, the child and Blue parted two bars of the gate, just wide enough for them to pass through.

"I'm not as young as I used to be..."

Old ears and old arms were no match for the child and Blue. It wasn't all his fault... Wanting to avoid unwanted, additional noise, and before the Old King could accidentally splash his foot down, Blue secretly gathered the standing liquid on the floor. However, he still noticed some of it on the walls nearby, and Blue could sense his building rage. Even under the blue light, he knew what this dark liquid was. Slowly, she repaired it, and fed it back into the body of the unseen prisoner up ahead.

Nearing the end of the corridor, a faint light came into view as they neared the prized one. Candles littered the room of the prisoner, and their flames began to waver in the growing presence of the Old King. Seeing the caged victim, he ran into the dome prison, and stood witness to the suffering.

This prisoner was too frail and gaunt to even move. He was suspended high in the air in a cage, with each limb and spike tethered by a series of chains to several stone columns in the middle of the room. Many of his bone spikes were broken and ground down into dust. It was a critical component for experiments, which were contained nearby in several jars.

Long and slender needles lay on a neatly polished stone table, while others remained stuck in his body. Deep stone pools, carved out of the bedrock, were nearby for collection, but they were nearly empty, and surrounded only by several fermenting bottles. His fur was dyed red, and he still had several small open wounds that Blue continued to mend. Horrified

of what he was seeing, the Old King almost did not recognize him as one of their own, and he rushed over to help him.

“What madness is this?!?!!”

The prisoner heard his words, and felt a sudden surge of energy from Blue’s repairs. It was enough to at least lift his head in acknowledgement of this friendly voice, but where this new source of strength came from, he did not know. He was calmed, but still too weak to speak. Although this body was spared the hard life of combat from their old ways, that did not mean it was in better condition.

Maimed from countless tortures, this prisoner was the victim of every cruel experiment and outburst from the Witch. Forever unable to sit and unable to stand, his weak body only slumped up against his rusty prison. With every new poison, his mind endlessly wandered deeper into madness, and he was forever trapped. He had nearly withered away, but his spirit held on, and now Blue knew why.

Particles of the mountain had changed his blood, and helped keep him alive. His body resisted the poisons coursing through him, and Blue even saw similarities with that of the Old King. Their cells were different than the others they passed in town. Could climbing the mountain really change them? The mountain could harm, but also protect.

Overflowing with rage, the Old King tore chain after chain from the stone pillars. His anger controlled his mind, but Blue calmed his consequences, and contained all of these

sounds to only a small local disturbance. Each chain snapped from a dormant power awakened within the Old King. It too wanted to free the prisoner, and perhaps even, free their own. The chains fell as a hard rain onto the wet floor, but nary a fallen pebble was heard beyond the walls of the prison.

The Witch would soon discover their little scheme, as it was nearly time for her most important (and savored) daily collection of tastes. Blue could hear her growing footsteps in the distance, and monitored her vibrations for any signs of a new suspicion. The Witch was hungry, and Blue accelerated their movements as they helped the Old King lower the cage. He leapt up and ripped it open, only to gently embrace the frail being.

Uncertain and without hope, the Old King had never seen one of their kind in such poor condition. Other victims of the Witch's poisons always had some movement and signs of life to them, but the Old King was certain death was near for the one in his hands. Their body was so mangled and shriveled, if he was not gentle, a wrong touch could be a fatal blow.

Recognizing the gentle embrace, the nearly lifeless being let out a sigh of relief, but they were too weak to even open their eyes. Flies of death gathered near them, and the Old King knew their end was close. The Last King would not survive for much longer, and the Old King only wished to give him a clean and quick death, free of her experiments.

Gripping several of the tubes that still connected his body, the Old King summoned the courage to end his life. Some tubes

brought him poisons, but others drained him. The Old King visually traced their origins, and saw a jar slowly filling up, drip by drip. These echoing sounds only enraged him further, and Blue and the child calmly approached him, but he needed no permission, especially from one that did not fight in their wars. Tightening his grip, the Old King was ready to rip away the tubes, and set him free.

Blue's other observations lingered on the concoctions that surrounded them. All were made from the blood of this being. It contained an essence of the mountain, and helped the Witch create her poisons. With her pillaging of the lands, this rare source was one of the few that remained. What would the Witch do when her food was gone?

[Goodbye, my son.]

"Stop!"

The Old King was too moved by the situation, and struggled to listen to the child's requests, or even, hear the quickly approaching footsteps of the Witch. Their steady beat increased in intensity, and Blue moved the child next to the Old King. In these final moments, he only wanted to be left alone, and he did not believe that a child could understand. Even the river would not heal these wounds.

"This is the end, don't you see?"

"No, I don't."

"He does not need to suffer any longer."

"He won't..."

Clamoring commotion of the Witch and her cadre drew near, and Blue accelerated her repairs from within the Last King. Even if the Old King did not believe he would survive, Blue still needed the knowledge of this one for their journey. Unneeded harm would come to the Last King if their tubes were hastily removed, but the Old King would no longer listen to them. Sounds of a large gate opening rippled through the halls as their Queen approached. The Old King would not let the Witch keep one of his people on the verge of death, no matter her reasoning. He was certain they were out of time, and refused to let the torture of the Last King continue. Blue only offered her simple rebuke to his departing words.

“Goodbye-”

Hello!

Seeing his muscles twitch and react to his convictions, Blue cut him short. In her introductions, she readily reassured him that he was due for a little hope. She invited him (somewhat by force) to her shared mind with the child, and calmed him with her unheard words. He was now the stranger in a foreign land, but he was welcomed, (although closely monitored) and his hosts were hospitable. Dripping sounds of a tainted blood and the march of the Witch ceased as all was quiet.

A small crack and pop from the fireplace in Blue’s cottage brought the Old King back to the present (at least, in their minds). They were now sitting comfortably on lush blue clouds in front of this neatly tended fire. The

Old King turned to see the child in their natural form, and Blue chose that of a simple blue sphere of light.

*[**“I knew you were not from this world... I see there is much mystery left to discover...”***

Hello!!!

Wait... I’m not from here?

Well, here here, but not there there...

Right...]

The Old King matched the child’s greeting, and slowly waved back at them. His eyes slowly settled on the fire in front of him, and he wondered about these new beings. Despite their different language, somehow, he understood these new voices. They were light and crisp, and almost sounded like a new type of music. Their words soothed him, but his sense of ease faded. The calm of Blue’s hospitality allowed his mind to return to his own thoughts, and the suffering of his people.

*[**“What is this place?”***

My mind!

And my home!]

More questions dwelled within the Old King, but Blue did not have time to help him understand all of their intricate ways. She only wanted to offer him her help, and prevent any unnecessary harm. The child looked to the bobbing blue orb, and wondered about the Old King’s future. About their future... Was it absolute? Until they really knew what was within the mountain, nothing here (nor there), was for certain.

[I can heal your son...

I knew they were related!

But not here...

She is too close

"You know my secrets...

Then you must know this fight is not one I can run from."

This is not a battle only one can win

"She will destroy all of us if she does not drink."]

Anything short of mind control would not convince this old and stubborn creature to come with them, but what he said was true. His final duty as a king was to confront the cause of their suffering, and he would defend his people from her harm, even if it cost him his life. She too was one of their kind. Would she remember their old teachings? He had to try... They were not the enemy.

[Give her this water as proof of other ways]

Blue bestowed a small, seemingly clear vial to the Old King. Only this time, the water shimmered blue, as she added just one of her particles. She updated the primitive ones in their water to a simple version of herself. Ones that could resist the Witch, and ones that would help to cultivate life. The vial was a small creation, made from the ashes of the Old King's history. Unwanted matter transformed into something new. Perhaps, left with the Old King, it could offer the Witch some proof of goodwill. Or, at least, something else to drink. It would clear her mind, and allow the Old King's words to reach her.

He held this tiny vial in his hand, but he knew this was not the water of the mountain. Looking up to the blue orb, his eyes seemed to thank her, but he knew deep down, the Witch would not change her ways. She never saw herself as an equal of their people, even the Kings, and she only wanted their powers and gifts all for herself. Even if it only meant delaying her chase, the Old King had to try to appease her, for it would give them a head start on the mountain. His last fight was the battle of their minds, but now only one thought lingered.

*[**“So, you really think you can best the mountain...***
What then, of my son?
You can really help him?”
I will heal Kodo
“He remembers...”
I just hope he remembers the cave...]

The Old King struggled to imagine how this was possible. Even if he did not fully trust them or understand their ways, there was little other option. One last look around her cottage, and he decided it was no longer necessary to question her decisions. Despite his nerves, the presence of these new beings uplifted him. He did not know the full extent of their powers, but he was certain his son would remember the way.

*[**“The mountain becomes part of your very being.***
Can you really forget who you are?”
Did the Witch?]

With a heavy heart, the Old King turned back towards the fire. He was eager to return to the present, and face his destiny. With nothing more to say, the child looked to Blue, and her parting words released the Old King from their mind, but not before one last request.

*[**“And the river...***
If there is a way...
Please, set her free...”
I hope you know how to swim...]

20. Interrogation

As the last of the blue light slowly faded, it left the Old King alone, and to the mercy of wavering candlelight. Only the curious kept their flame, and their new dance seemed to summon another. Their shifting shadows did not put him at ease, and they moved in response to a growing presence. With his senses now attuned for sound, the Old King let out a focused breath, and prepared himself for the next encounter.

In search of their hunt, a clunking cadre of heavily armored brutes stumbled about the poorly lit hallways. Each carried their own light, but it was weak, and without substance. Their heavy beat of metallic footsteps cracked the ornate tile floors upon which they attempted to move (and stand). They were not welcome.

Many fell, and their scrambling to catch themselves left them without their precious light. In their resulting blindness, they frantically searched through empty dead ends, and lifeless cells. No sound was concealed, for the chant of their march was a taunting invitation for their unmet prey. Their song grew in size, ringing all throughout the stone prison. Unstable feet sloshed through the puddles of their victims, and added the last new note. Their rapid breath drew closer to the Old King, and its pace matched that of their march. He could now clearly hear each of

their voices, but his breath remained calm. His mind was empty.

Soft glows emerged from the passageways, and found the Old King. One last breath alone, and before it escaped him, the chamber flooded with the guards and their remaining torches. Matching the cadence of their breath, their flames rapidly whipped back and forth. The guards circled him, but their glazed eyes only looked to their prey as a prized delicacy. Each one could detect his untainted blood.

Excited shadows happily danced along the walls as the smell of the Old King overwhelmed the guards. The weak willed began to falter, for this was a special kill, and their urges were overpowering. Ravenously chomping at the air, they awaited her permission to feast, but this prize was not for them. Just before a disobedient one sampled a taste, their Queen entered the chamber. She did not embrace her former king, and her words sought to mock him.

"The Derelict King has returned… as a thief!"

"You are the one who takes…"

The Witch could only laugh in response at his attempt to speak to her. Anger from her loss of a most prized pet happily morphed into a sadistic delight as she realized the true value of her new spoils. Many seasons had passed since she was directly spoken to, much less accused of anything less than perfect. It was her own generosity that had set their people

free, and gave everyone a bountiful life. None of the Old Kings could claim such a feat. Any critique of this was a personal attack, one met with an equally unwelcoming gesture of pain and retribution.

“Now, now, you come bringing gifts...
So,
where are they?”

Turning her back to the Old King, her guards seized him. They beat him until he collapsed, and forced him to grovel before their Queen. Firmly restrained, (from even subtle movements) he could not even lift his head to see her. Slowly, she walked over to her stone tables, and her fingers coyly teased her instruments, but she was only interested in those suited for... special occasions. This would not be a life she ends, but one she explores through exciting new methods, ones that were too powerful for the weakened, Last King. It no longer bothered her that her prized pet was gone, as another, healthier one, (although older) took his place.

“What becomes of our son?”

“The mother embraces him-”

“Only in death!”

Her sinister laughter only scoffed at him. Like many who were weak but wanted power, she desired the treasure of the mountain in order to rule over them. Her desires were of a beautiful and powerful leader, but never one

as their equal. Without the mountain's mysteries, there would always be another they feared. She knew of this other, for the mountain's power was immense, and guarded by an even more powerful foe. The Last King would try again, but she was certain he would fail. They always failed the final test.

"A return is impossible.
NO ONE survives without me..."

Laughter continued to mock him as she gently laid down an object hidden within a folded piece of cloth. A slow and methodical unwrapping, her hands longingly hovered over it while she admired her favorite possession. Upon her coronation, the new Queen had this once ornate and ceremonial artifact reforged into a long and slender needle. It was her most precious and guarded item. Her fingers reluctantly seized it, and she quivered under her growing delight.

Hoarding of her desires was an easy task, and her pets were second only to her prized possessions of their past. Any emptiness she felt was easily suppressed through another artifact, and her collection was almost complete. Her attention turned to earlier spoils, and this disfigured stone carving was mounted over her empty pools... Watching them... Guarding them... She pulled down on it, and the stone walls behind the Old King collapsed. He could not see them, but he heard their suffering.

First filling the cracks in the stone, liquid pooled around them, and her eerie walk through these new puddles echoed in beat

with the unseen cries. As she circled her prey, she slowly dragged the tip of her needle along the surfaces of her dungeon. It screeched and bellowed, changing its scream depending on the material it scratched, and taunted the Old King of his impending suffering. Drawing nearer to him, she continued to orbit his body as she admired his resistance to age. She whispered into his ear, but her invitation was quickly denied.

"I am only here to help!"

"Why did you abandon what you know to be right...?"

While she teased the surface of his body with her needle, she reflected on her other tools, and her people. Through reflections in the puddles, the Old King stared at what became of her, and what was left of her. Fading light from the torches danced within the trapped reflections of her attire. She glistened with the stolen gems of the mountain, and they reluctantly covered her body while they concealed her true form. Their beauty captured the light in a dazzling display of reflections, but these only distracted her followers from her true nature. Seizing a prized, special one from under her clothes, she set it on the table before the Old King.

"Your destructive old ways are how we got here.

Or did you forget?"

While she impatiently awaited his answer, she tapped the smaller gems in front of her with her needle, hoping his mind would dwell on the past, on his mistakes, and on his regrets. Any small and unpleasant thought would soon grow to consume him, and the influence of her newest scents slowly crept into his being. However, his mind was focused, and he calmly listened to her tapping as she attempted to lure his fascination into their shared suffering.

Even the guards were influenced, and their grip on the Old King weakened. He lifted his head, and as he made eye contact with the Witch, she suddenly smashed her prized gem into dust with her fist. A plume filled the air, and merged with her scents for all of them to breathe. This harsh act of violence towards their sacred lands disturbed the Old King, but her guards quickly tightened their grip. Feeling the strongest effects of the powerful cloud, the Witch became aloof, and her personality starkly changed.

“The mountain...
Haunts us...
It torments my people...”

Her apathy turned manic, and she eagerly emptied her pockets, adding even larger gems to crush. Now the potency of her creation was guaranteed, but not without consequence. This explicit action unsettled many of the guards, but they quickly recomposed themselves, and continued their

obedience. Their resolve was strong, for they had survived her most deadly experiments. However... none of them had ever stood so close... They stood still as their movements froze, and their breaths became shallow and empty with anticipation.

Their Queen then palmed one of the oldest harvests of the kings from out of a hidden pocket. This small vial of blood was thickened from countless fermentations, and its tiny bubbles splattered against its crystal prison in an eager attempt to escape. The last of this old blood was alive.

Ready to savor its taste, she unveiled the vial, and slowly tapped it with the tip of her prized needle. Her growing excitement only increased this tune of tapping, and some of her guards flinched from fear. Not one for restraint, her impatience poured all of the remaining contents out onto the gem dust in front of her. Dark red fumes filled the air, and many of her weaker guards suddenly fled. A quick glance from her eye sent one of her most trusted after them. Weakness was rare these days, but if they were weak, then they were food.

Again, her attention shifted, this time to her untested hypothesis, but the Old King only looked into the lifeless eyes of each of his fellow kin. Many of the guards had a glazed look, but a select few held a wild glare, ones that followed his eyes, and every subtle movement of his body. Their false smile showed their artificially sharpened teeth, as they were ready to show their old king the true powers of her gifts. With the new fumes, their eyes burned, and matched the color of

the cloud that lingered around them. The Old King resisted much of this new influence, and was instead, disgusted with her madness.

“What have you done!?”

This desecration of the mountain was unbelievable to the Old King, and he feared a powerful retribution. Seeing his growing fear excited the Witch, and her slow grin revealed her own, unchanged teeth. Her smile continued to grow as she witnessed the experiment unfold. Its new airs wafted out, into the cells behind the Old King, down the hallways, and even through the many cracks throughout the dungeon. Bubbles emerged from the pile of dust in front of her, and she gave them a stir with the needle before they could pop. Now the dust fizzled and foamed. Time to wait, and her attention again returned to the Old King as she walked towards him.

“We…
seek a release…”

A change of mind, perhaps from her spells, perhaps too from the idea of simply interacting with one so pathetic, and so beneath her. Even the oldest of the worthless, Old Kings commanded her curiosity, and this alone tempted a conversation. Soon, she would play with his mind, and all of his thoughts would be hers, but she had to wait. For now, she entertained his last free thoughts.

“Even now you cling to the past…
…but this is the end…”

“So, you can’t kill the ones who have ascended.
Even yourself...”

Laughter filled the room in response to his misled accusations. All of her people would again find respite, even if only briefly. With narrowing eyes, she thought, perhaps the Old King would feed them longer than expected. Her hunger closed in on the Old King, but just before she took a bite, she turned away, as she sensed her curiosity beginning to savor, perhaps, too much. She strongly desired to appease this new appetite, and only hoped it would last longer than his predecessor. Her voice became tired and drawn out, as if she were talking to a lesser being who would never understand.

“There is only so much I can do to save us...
If you can’t survive...
Then your sacrifice will be for nothing!
We will suffer...
Stay strong, won’t you?
For us...”

“You call this survival?!”

Only one torch remained lit, and she grabbed it from the guard. All remaining guards were dismissed, and their grip on the Old King was abandoned. His circulation returned, and with each breath, his blood effortlessly carried her newest poison throughout his body. Circling behind the Old King, the Witch reached into the shadows, and

pulled forth a long scroll from within the cracked stone walls. Her arrogance demanded the truth, and she was happy to oblige.

“The mountain mocks us, and grows taller every day...
It STEALS our waters...
...and our lands...
The women are barren, and the old grow older!
Yet...
None perish...
This is the curse of the mountain.
This is the legacy of the kings.”

“You sacrifice one life for another...
Your madness is our curse!”

“That... is their wish...”

The Old King refused to believe her shocking confession, and remained silent as he felt the growing effects of her poison. Her smugness kept her thoughts to herself, and she returned to her table, but not before lighting a string of candles behind the Old King. Each one struggled to keep its flame. Ready to begin, the Witch mounted the torch to an empty sconce on the wall behind her, while the Old King slowly turned to view the new lights, and witness her horrors.

Other prized pets of the Witch were kept close, with the most alert in a cage, while those barely alive lay out in the open on the cold stone. All were broken, and no longer opposed her rule. Many were unfit, or with too many flaws, and thus, the least of their kind.

Others too weak, and unable to harvest her gems, were deemed unworthy of life itself. Yet even in their weakness, they resisted her.

“They hunger for something they do not have...
Nor ever will...”

These gaunt elders were the oldest of their people, and they writhed in pain from her torments. All suffered from their own unique mania the Witch had created, and they grew worse every day. Some murmured to themselves in an indistinct tongue, while others lay in isolation, and in puddles of their own excretions. Drooling on themselves, their behavior was repetitive, and at times erratic. With the passing of time, their minds turned against even the most resilient. They smelled of death.

“Why...?
WHY DO YOU DO THIS?!”

His words echoed throughout the labyrinths. Their treatment was worse than anything he once experienced, but none of his people would hear his screams, except for her apathetic ears. She let his echoes fade with her concerns. Rhythmic sounds of deep drumming shook the walls around them, echoing the tensions of a surface chase. The Old King’s anger faded, and he feared his son’s capture. Influenced from the new poison, he no longer believed the new child could stop this madness, or her army, much less heal these wounds... Even with the mountain’s

help...

A stark shift in emotion, and the Witch became manic. She delighted in the Old King's loss of control, for she believed it was evidence of her impending success. These drums were of their old warnings, but now they were used to pursue her hunts. Old emotions from his old ways, and he remembered the last interaction in the child's mind. Something new to change them perhaps, and this revelation of the unknown soothed him.

However, this brief moment of calm enraged her, and her cruel delight spiraled deep into the sadistic. Veins bulged from her arms as her anger seized her, and she gripped the last of her gems in her hand. Destroying the last of her most precious stones, her anger turned them to dust. New desires emerged, ones seeking to fill the Old King's mind with only the best of her experimental efforts, for there were no others healthy enough for her games. A perfect sense of dread. She struggled to release her grip, but her bounding excitement set her free. While shaking profusely, she consumed what little remained of the last of her precious gems.

"Your old waters NO LONGER care for us...
CARE FOR ME!
I was forced to discover...
Other means...
For
usssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss"

Her trembling hands placed the scroll on top of the table, and she recklessly pushed it

open with the tip of her needle. Its parchment was old and stiff, and it decayed with every rotation as it reluctantly unwound. Several smaller flakes tore themselves loose as it rolled across to the other end of the table. The voice of the Witch became erratic, and matched her growing mania.

“I-
I KNOW
Youu h-hid thingss from usss...”

“You destroyed our writings... because you failed to understand?”

Deafening laughter muted his words. Amusement from his hypocrisy mixed with her insights as she studied the last of their old texts. Their culture was all but erased, and this sorrow again filled the Old King’s heart. Now all that remained was their oral history, and he was one of the last who knew the truth. A truth that could harm the Witch, but their history was hers to rewrite, and she would be their legend. Wide, piercing eyes cut through him as she accused him of their failures, and her anger focused her voice.

“The MOUNTAIN abandons us!
Your old ways end with YOU!”

Rage within her eyes faded as her attention returned to the scroll. She twirled her needle in her fingers, and then stabbed the parchment. Cutting through the fine paper was effortless, and cast out several sparks as her cut made contact with the volatile dust

underneath. This reaction slowly changed the color of the paper to a deep black, and its words were now unreadable.

Carelessly dragging the needle off her stone desk, she then dangled it from her fingers, and slowly walked over to the Old King. A short detour, and she grabbed her favorite chalice from out of a small nook in the lowered stone wall. It matched the majesty of her dress, and its gems resonated with her touch. She only filled this cup with her most savored drinks.

“Exploiting those secrets will only cause suffering.”

“I take what I want, did not the kings?”

“You are not immune from this harm...”

“If you have power, then you should USE IT!”

A power shared, or a power taken, she cared not, as long as she was in control. She offered him a small, dirty cup from the floor. Something to eventually ease his thirst, but he did not accept her offering. Apathetic to his gestures, she instead dropped it. Echoing bounces on the floor alerted several of her pets to their calling.

Time to eat.

Seldom an abundance, many howled and became frantic. Their excitement matched that of the surface chase, and the stone walls around the Old King and their Queen quaked.

Dust fell around them, but these disturbances pleased her.

“Once again you send your own to their death!
I know what you are trying to do...
But his blood was thin and weak!
He could barely feed us...”
“You... drink from us...”
“Many of my best survived on single drops.
Now that you have returned...
They can finally rest!
Will you give them peace...?”

Keeping her needle pointed at her enemy, she moved into position, and stood over her old king. Certain he would try and attack, she stood ready to strike, and only looked down upon him. They were not equal. Even she was ready to feast, and her voice elevated with renewed convictions.

“I hope you survive longer than your predecessors...”

The Old King was in disbelief, but now he understood. For her to go to such extremes meant that his child and the newcomers were in extreme danger. If they were caught, then they were doomed to a life of unimaginable suffering. All who journeyed up the mountain were forever changed, and the Witch and her people craved only their blood.

A mind like this would not listen to reason, and the Old King looked for an escape. He tried to stand, but the heaviness of his body was captured by her poisons, and he

collapsed. Even a finger was too heavy, and he could barely lift it off the ground. Caressing her needle, her voice again fluctuated through newer highs and lows as she condescendingly spoke to the Old King.

“The old can’t be left alone any longer.
Surely you see what becomes of their desires…”

With her hand, she gently parted his fur while guiding his head, and turned him to face the tormented. Now with much of his neck exposed, she violently thrust her needle deep into his flesh. It easily pierced his skin, and his pulse dressed her in a new harvest. She eagerly filled her cup with a gluttonous sample.

Savoring the first sip, she then drove the needle down, deep into his bones. Into his marrow… This would have been a fatal blow to many of their kind, but his resource was rich, and she knew of his resistance to death. A sigh of relief, as she felt the first of the many effects.

Her avarice knew no bounds, and one of her many lifelong desires was nearly complete. Ending her embrace, she walked back towards the pile of shattered gems as her newest prisoner collapsed to the floor. Blood and marrow of the Old King poured out of the porous needle, and filled the cracks in the floors, flowing into the empty pools of the dungeon. He slipped in and out of consciousness, but remained silent, despite the immense amount of pain.

“Let us discover your truth...”

From her cup, she poured out the Old King’s blood into several vials. A steady last pour, every drop was savored, and she held the final vial up into the light of the torch behind her. Swirling it around, she admired its sparkle, before then pouring it out onto the stone table. Using her finger, she mixed in some dust of the gems, and with her other hand, poured in a premade ingredient.

In disbelief, she gasped as she watched the liquid shimmer, give off its own light, and then crystallize into smaller gems. Clenching her teeth, she regained her composure. No matter, as her initial suspense now only amused her, and she cracked a cackling smile.

Feeling superior to their old wisdom, the Witch threw the scroll onto the ground in front of the Old King. The size of the scroll alone clued him in on what she was reading, but the madness of the Witch escaped him. She threw another powder onto the scroll, and it burst into a green flame that quickly died. Smoke mixed with the other gases around them, and what little ash remained happily merged with the Old King’s blood. His voice was weak, and he almost sounded amused as he drifted off.

“Now...
you fear...
our
superstitions...?”
“I know what is up there.
You cannot control it!”

Overpowered from her poisons, he

closed his eyes. The Old King noticed subtle changes in his thoughts, and he could feel his mind begin to slip away. This was a new form of mind control, and one he never experienced in her previous tortures. His thoughts wandered, and many were not his own. He feared he would reveal all of their secrets, and betray even the new child.

The true extent of her powers was unknown to the Old King, but in his paranoia, he was certain the Witch could easily destroy the mountain. His last thought before he slipped away, was only of an apology. The Witch could not yet hear his thoughts, but there was one who was newly listening, and she did not want to see her new friend suffer under the methods of one so cruel.

[I am sorry my new friend...
Huh, what?
Why...
*Don't tell me...**]***

Their conversation was heard only between them, and her voice soothed him as she isolated his mind from harm. A burst of light that only he could see was his fantastic reintroduction. Her enthusiasm was met with only minor skepticism, but he welcomed the relief, even if it was still unbelievable. If they hadn't already met, he would have thought he was dead.

[You never left...
I mean, I did, but, Icanmoveveryfast!!
And besides...
YOU LOOKED UNWELL!
...Are

*you ok?***]**

Blue helped him sift through all of his visuals, sounds, and emotions as the Old King's memories of the Witch unfolded before them. Her childhood adventures with him, good times and bad. Fears and corruption, then her rise to power flew by them faster than he could remember them. This was not a person Blue needed to know, or even wanted to know. Their formal introduction would be before the end. Blue could only wonder, what was the Witch so afraid of?

[I thought I could resist her...
But...
My thoughts will betray you...
Betray us...
She will...

Well, THAT'S WHY I'M HERE ***>:D***]

Blue did not need the worries of another old man to consume himself and risk harming their journey up the mountain. She pacified his remaining concerns as he relaxed, and drifted off. His sleep was not eternal, but Blue afforded him the best night's rest he ever had. One particle of Blue was enough to defend his mind, and she would help it heal away from her poisons. Soon enough, he would awaken to a new day.

One last crack and crunch of a stray, tiny gem shard, and the potion was complete. While the last of the newly acquired ingredients bubbled over, the Old King lost consciousness. Arriving to feast, the hungry

guards tossed his limp body into the cradle of chains that once held his son. The Witch secured him, but did not yet hoist him into the air. Only the sounds of her collections bubbled and popped throughout her dungeon, calling out to the famished, and the parched. The air grew still as her own flames abandoned her, and she murmured to herself at the start of the process.

“What secrets does my new pet know?”

21. An Adventure

Healing a mind was not an instantaneous task for Blue (this was only her second, well, maybe third (but she doesn't count those other (partial) ones...)). This one though, was of a vastly different (unstudied) species, and in far worse shape than even the child's once was. Many of Kodo's true memories were diluted and adulterated from the Witch's terrors. Blue would need to sift through each one, neatly untangle, and prune it to its former, natural state. Her repairs were thorough, and consumed much of her attention. She needed Kodo alert by the time they ascended the mountain, and so her protections on the child were minimal.

Others could see them.

Blue, the child, Kodo, AND Mr. Planck, made their way out of the labyrinths from a newly dug exit, and neared the surface. Much unbeknownst to himself, Mr. Planck, formerly 'the Plank', received a title upgrade. He was always willing to help, and soon, Blue would have a new task for him. Once Kodo's mind was whole, she would repair his body, but for now, it dripped, and left a trail of scents others could follow. Much of this unneeded liquid was poison, and Blue was uninterested in diverting more of herself (or Mr. Planck) for its recovery. They knew of its intent...

Cool mists of the mountain crept by

them as they emerged from the ground to a crisp midnight. This heavy air seemed rather interested in the labyrinths, and a few ghostly tendrils slithered their slow way down behind them. It was the end of the second day for the child, and the evening lullaby of the mountain soothed them. They drifted off to sleep as they crawled into a bed in Blue's cottage. She assumed control of all of their real, subsequent movements, and their new blue eyes guided them.

Little light illuminated the village of ruins. Only the tops of the many monuments were visible above the mist, and these stony sails cut through the fog as the mountain's airs invaded. Under this blanket, the town slept, and Blue weaved them in and out of these historical monoliths as they made their departure. A hungry, growing heat consumed the moisture in the air as she neared the mountain. They emerged from the secrecy of the mist, and drew near its source.

She carried Kodo on their back, and made their way up a small hill. Little remained, and they were surrounded by abandoned fields of dust, tall boulders, deep craters, and peculiar pebbles. Cresting the ridge, Blue spotted the ones responsible. The survivors... Helpless, glistening eyes roamed around their work at a nearby cave at the base of the mountain.

In an eternal search for the nearly extinct gems, those from the village that were able bodied were forced to dig away at the mountain. All methods of destruction were at their disposal. Through their large works, they diverted rivers of molten fire into the cave,

forcing the mountain to melt from within. Previous diggings had sheared off much of the mountain, and before Blue was a huge vertical wall that nearly touched the clouds. Its steep ascent prevented anyone courageous enough from embarking on any journey up the mountain, much less from starting their old, sacred trials. Now the true way was unknown, or, at the very least, the beginning. None of this was really a concern to Blue, as she could find out where the trail left off and begins anew. Besides, she didn't HAVE to walk...

A famished and parched crowd began to gather on the outskirts of their fiery prison. They curiously observed the child and their cargo as they watched them hurry past, towards the destroyed trailhead. Many were eager to stop their endless toil, and hopeful to see who was challenging their Queen's dogma. Normally, no one was allowed to even look at the mountain. Not even the guards...

Blue made eye contact with each prisoner as she passed, reassuring them of her return, and pacifying many of their fears with even the slightest glimmer. Such commotion at the end of an otherwise routine day was enough to startle at least one guard from his dutiful slumber, and his anger from the disturbance of his sleep quickly arose the others. Many were eager to coerce and humble the workers, but once their eyes set their sights on the newcomer, they froze in disbelief. The guards knew the value of the one they carried, and their desires shifted to that which was most prized.

Many of them were well accustomed to the unsightly horrors of those who could not

withstand the experiments of their Queen. Now that the river was dry, she had their useless bodies dumped into the rivers of fire as discarded waste. Snide comments from numerous guards revealed their contempt, but only one interested Blue. A question from the living was seldom ignored, but not necessarily answered.

"Come to dispose of another experiment?"

A few of the more unruly guards began to soak their brands in the lava, eagerly ready to forcefully 'encourage' everyone back to work... and greet the newcomer. Despite the overt threat, workers continued to gather, for many were curious as to whom they were disposing. It had been a long time since the Queen had rid herself of someone so weak. However, the state of Kodo was unlike anything they had ever seen before, and many in the crowd turned away from the horrific sight of their kind. They knew not who it was, much less that they were once very close. Catching a scent of the Witch's newest, obscene torture, others released what little contents of their stomachs they had.

Blue scurried around the lonely pools of lava and agitated bends of the river of fire. She moved her party closer towards the great face of the mountain, and the guards grew angry from her apparent disrespect. The strongest of these disgruntled brutes slammed his fist into the ground in an attempt to challenge the newcomer. They were too clean, he thought, and could use a little scarring. He

was happily eager to be the first to lay a brand on the child, and this newest worker would be his to command.

“Another for the river?”

Blue did not respond, nor give him the attention of her eyes. Instead, she looked at the face of the mountain, and scanned it for any clues provided from distant memories discovered during her repairs of Kodo’s mind. The path was important, wherever it was... The guard tried again.

“Normally, WE dump the bodies...”

His sadistic nature was captivated by this outlier, and he was eager to see if this child would sacrifice one of their own. If the prize on their back was now deemed worthless, then perhaps this new child was priceless. Other guards, eager to lay claim on the child, prepared themselves to challenge one another for the spoils, but only after a successful capture. Many guards had never seen someone so clean, and they soon realized this too was someone important. Their fantasies distracted them, and consumed many with a wicked cackle.

A child was no match for even one unarmed guard, but Blue could care less about their growing hostilities towards her. The drums of war neared, and the guards became jealous from the sound of reinforcements. They must act quickly if they were to secure their prize.

Standing perfectly still, Blue reflected on

the mountain, and the rivers of fire. These people had suffered much, and for many, any hope for freedom they once held was long since an extinct prophecy. Blue's journey of walking came to an early end, but at least she tried using their legs... Their body glistened in the warm glow of the fires, and she slowly turned them in order to address her approaching adversaries. She continued to embrace the knowledge of the mountain as she healed Kodo, for their adventure was about to begin.

Little effort was required for her to know of the assassins hiding in the shadows. She knew the intentions of the guards, simply from their behavior. A swindler to bribe and extort, vultures to take what they could, and others who simply enjoyed the sight of suffering. Blue had little time for these interactions, especially with those who would harm them. She readied a gift for the people of the cave, something they had forgotten about for so long, and something they now thought impossible. Perhaps it would rekindle their imagination, and their hope. Before they left the planet, she would come back for them.

Armed and ready, a senior guard swigged a special potion, one for use during times of riot and uprising. Afforded by his surging strength, he leapt across the river of fire. Landing with a loud and clumsy thud, the veins of his face bulged, and his eyes became bloodshot as his heart raced. Excited that he now had their attention, his breath quickened as he stared into the eyes of the child. Blue narrowed their eyes in amusement, but she did not move their body as the guard

approached.

“The young these days have no manners!”

Taking another footstep towards the silent child, he dragged his weapon through the river of fire. He wanted to make sure it was extra hot for his first lesson. One last deep repair of Kodo’s oldest memories of the mountain, and Blue readied their departure. It was time to go…

“Seeking to climb the mountain without our blessing?”

He lifted his sword from the river, and pointed it at the child. It dripped with a molten fire, but Blue did not care for his threats. The iris of the child’s eyes burned with a powerful blue light as she turned towards him. She spoke for herself, and without moving their lips. Her clear words were heard by all that were present.

I’ll be back… With some friends!

Blue loathed nearly all ‘permissions’, and cared not about acceptance from one so unhospitable. Little did they know, she was preventing their ultimate demise as well. Thinking of her kind, and the child’s, her ways were vastly different, and if she failed, then Faces would come for them all. He would eagerly destroy these opponents. Even the innocent…

Other guards surround them, now eager to take Blue by force, and challenge the

powerful voice. Some in the cave retreated out of fear of the guards, while others watched with renewed hope. Flicking his sword towards the child, the guard challenged Blue. A few droplets of molten rock landed near her and burst into flame, but she still did not move them. She looked to the flaming rock, then to the thrower.

Before a proper goodbye could be had (much less an introduction) Blue simply giggled, and jumped over the flanking guards in one effortless leap. Despite her sudden burst of speed, not a grain of sand moved in response, and even the air itself remained still. She made no sound as she left, and her blue eyes of the child faded from view.

Blue perched her party high above the destruction of the mountain. Those on the ground were nearly out of normal sight, and she looked back to them through the eyes of the child. Warm air rushed up the steep cliff as she peered over, and her powerful blue light of the child's eyes faded as she calmed those she carried. Many of the guards below began to panic and argue with one another, while others of weaker will fled towards the village.

Amazed from the quick leap up the mountain, the prisoners celebrated and cheered. They were excited that there was another worthy of the forgotten test, let alone strong enough to make it past the Queen's many tricks and traps. However, some were afraid, and feared retaliation. The Witch had a relentless desire to conquer the mountain, and destroy anyone who stood in her way.

Blue must hurry, lest she let them suffer.

All became quiet, as the sounds from below slowly faded. Any noise was absorbed by tiny flakes of fresh, light snow that fell near them. Rising heat from the rivers of fire helped melt any snow that lingered nearby, but the mountain was quick to cool, and everything up the path ahead had an icy surface. Ordinary travel was nearly impossible, especially without the correct supplies. Blue stood at what was left of the old Trail of Trials, and eager to begin, she turned their attention towards the unseen peak. It was hidden behind the clouds, but if Kodo's memories were true, and she followed this path, someone, or something, would greet her. She knew not how long the journey would take... nor how high the mountain truly was...

Sliding freely on its surface, she easily moved around on the ice. Sometimes skating backwards, or sometimes just giving herself one big push, she weaved in, and out, and through various mounds of snow. Eventually it was cold enough for snow to settle on the ice, and this white, lumpy blanket concealed many old runes and petrified remains of a once lush forest. Tiny sparks of her light dove in and out of the snow as she passed, scanning the markings, and documenting all she could on their journey. The path narrowed as she neared the clouds, and entered the snowy mist.

She moved Kodo into their arms, and seemed to dance with him as she twirled along the ice, but despite her repairs, he was not getting any better. Even with the removal of most of the poison, nearly all signs of life in his

organs were fleeting. These remaining poison particles of the Witch were sticky, and they clung to their host. They originated from the mountain, and now Blue wondered about the air he struggled to breathe. It was inert, but eerily still. If the Old Man knew of this place, then perhaps her kind really was hiding here...

[AH HAH!]

Undisturbed, the child slept through her ramblings. Blue wondered about two little clouds forming around their legs, and the motivations of this not so ordinary air. This mist was interesting, yes, but it did not speak to her, and so she did not introduce herself quite yet. As they moved forward, she cut through the thickening mist ahead of them, but it did not move as predicted. Little helpers... These primitive machine creatures of the airs were behaving erratically, and something about them was vastly different than any origin or evolution she had once studied. Her lights flickered as she sent out small scouting parties, and they searched all around them for answers, but the fog continued to condense.

With the air absorbing nearly all sounds, Blue could barely hear Kodo's labored breathing, despite holding him so close. As her small beams of light danced around him, she gently set him down, up against a rock, and provided him her own special air to breathe. It uplifted him, nearly breathing for him, and as Blue wondered about the true nature of this strange place, he spoke through her airs, but it was barely a whisper.

“The path…”

Blue looked to his intentions, and saw what little of it remained. Her scouts pierced the snow and ice, but despite a quick extra boost of power, they still could not see through the mist. Old, inert particles of the mountain hovered lifelessly in the air, and blocked her inquiring beams. Now, even her location itself was in question.

Another healthy breath from Kodo, and the mist in turn, moved in response. Bringing forth new sounds, it slowly swayed back and forth around them. Compacted gifts echoed melodies from a higher source on the mountain. Unmuffled by the dense air, each note slowly became clear and crisp. Before Kodo could finish his second new breath, the song of the mountain welcomed them.

Blue quickly translated the many new words, inflections, and other subtleties presented around them. With every phrase, more was learned. Spoken through song, it was an ancient language of this planet. It was catchy, perhaps, too catchy, and Blue moved their body in response to this rhythm.

Sensing another change in tone, Blue experienced a drive to explore this… newfound idea. What good was a song without a dance? She eagerly chose her partner, and scooped up Kodo as she made her way back up the mountain. The light bounced in between the sleeping child and Kodo as she added her own notes during their journey through the fog. There were many languages, all harmonious, and their reach was far as they roared past

Violet.

Such a maaggicaall TrIpPPPP upPP THE mooooooOOOUNNTaaaiiinnn

o_o;;

A transparent version of Violet roamed around, deep out in the empty space between the planet and their home. She inspected one of the mountain crystals in between her fingers, and played with its movements as it bended her light. Deep in thought, her analysis was only disturbed by those who were distracted, and her pondering shifted to this new tune roaring past her.

Quickly seizing the crystal out of her airs, she attempted to hide her small laugh as she whispered reassurances to the excited visitor in her hand. She sent one of her more, how to say, melodic messengers, down to pay Blue a visit. She was greeted by the last verse, and this one was the most harmonious.

friieeeeennnddddd!!
new
a
with
jouuurrneeyyy
A

One last note, and the violet messenger added a lively burst to their culminating festivities. Blue nearly bounced Kodo out of her arms, but she carefully caught him as she seemed to bow the child from her concluding performance. A prominent return, and her

display of violet light wrapped around her familiar form. She wiggled to a lingering beat as Blue finished exploring the last footsteps of the Old Man's many dances.

Violet sensed a new voice, but this ominous wind disturbed her. Agitated by the song,[It wasn't that bad...] and painful memories that were not his, Kodo coughed from his worsening wounds. Blue struggled to protect her earlier repairs as the remaining poison within resonated with the new airs. Fear gripped Kodo, but he willed himself to warn them. He struggled to speak, and even in Blue's airs his words were barely a whisper. He was not welcome.

"The chant of death..."

THAT SEEMS A LITTLE HARSH!

I

hear it too

Freezing mountain air from above howled past them, crystallizing much of the mist, and absorbing any distinct voice. Violet observed these particles of ice as they too carried their own unique tune. These gate keepers were not so different than the original sentinels, for they only wanted to protect their own. She followed their curiosity, and turned her attention to Kodo's wounds.

Chemical scarring from the Witch reacted violently in these new airs. It burned Kodo from their icy touch, and rejected her corruption. These altered ones of their kind were forbidden, and Violet sought to extract them. An easy lesson from her prior conversation with this planet's host, she

showed Blue their simple truth. Now Blue could easily mend Kodo before they finished their ascent, and move freely on the mountain, without restricted access.

Violet placed her hands on Kodo, and her light called out to the mountain's forsaken brethren residing in his body. He writhed in pain as these creations of the Witch refused her, but she moved quickly, and it was over as soon as the pain began. His body wept, and Violet returned the poisoned ones to the winds of the mountain. They would take care of their own, and the ice carried these particles away in a dazzling swirl. Back to their home, and to the top of the mountain... Out into space...

No longer in the presence of the Witch, and with the knowledge of Kodo, Blue could now see through and decode the mist. It paid no mind to her, and seemed only interested in Kodo... and the child... However, Kodo was bleeding out, and Violet gave a single nod of approval to the ol' Mr. Planck. He already knew exactly what to do. Besides, Kodo couldn't survive travel off of the planet on his own, for the old ones of the mountain had escaped, forever leaving the ones who sought to corrupt them. Before Kodo passed out completely, he again warned them.

"The peak is... only for the peaceful..."

Well then, I hope you remember

[Me too...]

Mr. Planck abandoned the disguise of the child, and enveloped Kodo in a new suit of armor. One fit for his forgotten royalty, and

one well suited for the vastness of empty space. It was decorative, yet hardly delicate. Mr. Planck stood Kodo up, and began restoring his body, while Blue finished restoring his mind. The bleeding stopped.

Blue light peeked through Mr. Planck's suit, not that she didn't trust him, but his ways were largely unknown to her knowledge of the Old Man's research. Different, albeit, curious... Mr. Planck's mending was slow and tedious, and every cell was due for inspection. It was not just the wounds of the Witch that required his attention, for he gave equal care to older physical injuries. Feeling this new sense of calm from their mending, Kodo was certain of his end as he drifted off to sleep. His mind was now clear, and Blue could only wonder about his dreams as she made her exit.

Kodo's new armor attached to his body, and deep, thorough repairs rooted down into his bones. Mr. Planck started from within his marrow, and this reconstruction then spread out to his flesh and veins as each cell was neatly pruned and repaired. These pulses continued, out to his skin, and through the fur of his body as his essence was restored.

All was dark on the mountain, except for the child's blue eyes, and the presence of Violet. The winds ceased, and the mist hugged the mountain close in its cloud. Only the sounds of the child's mind were heard as Blue circled their thoughts, and watched them lift and depart as the child sank deeper into sleep. Ready to finish the climb, Blue gathered her strength, and walked towards Violet, but it was an abrupt end. The mountain shifted beneath their feet, and the mist fell away.

Before them stood a distant moon, the peak of the mountain. It lingered in between the dying star and the planet, strung together by a series of small asteroids. Huge solar bursts pelted this snowy peak, but it was never disturbed, and sheltered peacefully behind an invisible shield. Before Blue could continue, Violet shared with her the old wisdom of the planet she was about to leave. It was the last clue she needed.

Blue
?
There is one that does not belong
I will show them the way

Violet faded away out into empty space, and the child's eyes burned with a bright blue as Blue focused them on the summit. She now knew the secrets of the mountain, and seeing the end in sight made her that much more excited to finish the climb. This was a new path, and it was not a direct route. She enveloped the child in her blue fire as she flew towards the first large rock. Mr. Planck followed with the slumbering Kodo, and so began their hopping ascent. Dodging incoming asteroids, they followed the shattered memories of the broken path of the mountain, and of those once deemed worthy. This time, it would not escape her.

22. Into the Cave

WE’RE HERE!!!!!

Blue’s voice sounded distorted. Some inflections were high, sharp, crisp notes, while other words were only faintly understood and muffled. Their cadence woke Kodo, as she was chattering away out loud, talking to someone he could not see. Little did he know these voices shared one body, and he blinked wildly in confusion as he struggled to understand the changes surrounding him. This place on the mountain was vastly different from what he remembered. As he sat up, he struggled to wake from this dream... Or so he thought...

With Blue’s guidance, the child practiced walking while they waited for Kodo to fully awaken. A wobbly step with outstretched arms helped them balance, and Blue ever so slightly

nudged them in the right direction. Memories afforded by Blue, their muscles knew of these sensations, but they had yet to be fully experienced by the child. Another step...

Success!

A light, delicate snow fell beneath a thick, misty cloud cover, and Kodo admired the twirling flakes, for they were the largest he had ever seen. Some even seemed too big to be real, and he instinctually held out his hand to catch one that was nearly the size of his head. Balancing it on his hand, it remained upright, and despite his warmth, it did not melt. Everything on the peak was covered in snow, and tiny clouds hovered over the hidden rocks. Each had its own climate, and was home to tiny, fragile creatures. Curious...

Setting the snowflake on the ground, his hand parted the fluffy fallen snow, and it made a light crunch as it shushed him. He paused for a moment, and stared at this new life around him on the mountain. These small lifeforms were nearly invisible, and appeared as if they were made of a clear ice. Light danced within them, with each beam reflecting at whimsical angles, blurring their true form, and captivating any onlooker. They did not seem to mind his presence, and a few of these tiny insects crawled over his snow-dusted legs, seemingly taking an interest in his new armor.

Kodo knew it was cold, but he felt none of the usual pains of this once rare, weather phenomenon. The light snow slid off his armor as he slowly stood up, and it fell into a soft wind. He unknowingly left Blue’s airs, for he

was healed, and could now breathe on his own. Readying himself to greet the stranger, (who was now so captivated (and distracted) by a rock in their hand), he let out a deep breath that quickly froze, and fell to the ground. Many of the insects fancied the new taste.

HE'S AWAKE!

Blue and the child abandoned their rock inspection, and after quietly setting it down in the snow, they ran over to Kodo for their introductions. She and the child quickly rehearsed what to say in order to bring Kodo up to speed on the situation, but these efforts were in vain as the mountain was the first to properly welcome him. Each snowflake distorted the light as the airs greeted him in a language he could not understand. Captivated by these new sensations, he stood in awe as the airs whispered to him.

He briefly shivered, but the feeling quickly faded as he admired his armor. It glistened with its own pulse of light from each snowflake that made contact, delivering a welcoming kiss of information to Mr. Planck. A plethora of small, white scales covered his vitals, while threads of colorful, pulsing light connected them. Each vibrant band interwove decorative and protective patterns over his body that reacted to his movements, and communicated its own unique message. His rich black fur was newly cleansed, but littered with a few gray hairs he did not remember.

While his hands naturally opened, he realized something was now very different

about himself. Despite his tense movements, and despite his less than perfect stance, Mr. Planck's (and Blue's) repairs allowed his body to fully relax. It was a new feeling, one that he had never truly known. He simply looked down into his hands as he felt them pulse with these new, unknown energies.

A gentle breeze seemed to kiss his entire body, and this feeling nearly drove him back to slumber. He lightly tapped his fingers together as he studied their heightened awareness, and as he wondered about this new tingling sensation, he looked past his hands to the small alien being standing in front of him. They no longer looked like his species, and Blue had covered the child in suitable winter wear, with many shades of her favorite color. They were snug, and cozy. Who was this? What was this?

[I think you broke him...
It's always like this in the beginning...
Maybe he's not a morning person...]

Blue sighed as they waited. A new surge of life took over Kodo as he felt his blood flow effortlessly through his body. Each pulse now kept him awake, and ever more alert, even despite the intense calm he continued to experience. Mr. Planck's adaptive armor softly adjusted his posture, gently lifted him up, and relaxed him for each new breath.

Mr. Planck had no control over Kodo's mind, and it raced through many meandering thoughts as if he was trapped in a dream. Despite not believing what he was witnessing, the overwhelming calming sensation he felt kept him grounded, and eventually helped

settle his unrestricted mind. Impressed from the handiwork of Mr. Planck, Blue perched herself on the child's head for their introduction. With a few flicks from her whipping blue flames of light, she swept the snow off from the child's head. An excellent vantage point from which to observe the new observer. Kodo calmly looked to the alien creature in front of him, and was surprised he was unafraid.

Hello!

Kodo did not immediately respond. He swore he heard a voice, but he did not see this creature's mouth move. He was perplexed they knew his language, and even more curious about their perfect accent. Strangely still, the blue fire did not harm this being. He wanted to know more. His mind was free, and now full of questions.

Don't be afraid, we won't hurt you...

"What is this place...?"

[Oh no...]

Your father told us that you have been here...

"My father..."

We need your help!

Studying his surroundings, Kodo looked to his left, then slowly to his right. Perhaps a clue from Mr. Planck, and Kodo suddenly knew where he was. However, he had never known the peak of the mountain to have this kind of weather. At one time thought of as a sacred place, it was once protected and neatly pruned by the guardian of the mountain. It

was supposed to be a dry landscape, clean and tidy. Even the sands were once neatly swept, but it was drastically different now, and without any visible plants. Kodo was afraid of what curses they brought, but deep down, he knew they were not the cause. His thoughts returned to the Old King.

"What becomes of him?"

His mind is safe...

"His mind..."

The child's eyebrows lifted as if wondering if he was asking a question. Blue's vague answers did not give Kodo an expected response, but despite their brevity, her words somehow soothed him. Wander his mind did, and he knew his new armor did not belong to his people, but why this being would help him, he did not know. He suspected a hidden motive. Were they his ally, or an enemy?

"What of the Witch...?"

Off doing Witch things, I suppose...

It is what is in the cave that most concerns us

Kodo suspected this stranger was steadfast in their resolve, but he could not help them. Without a proper invitation, the lair of the guardian was a forbidden place, and they could not stand peacefully in its presence. Why would the guardian welcome anyone when his people destroyed its home? Waiting for an invitation now was fruitless. Any caves and delicate formations would not have survived the devastation from his people, and he doubted the guardian would still live in

such a place. Overcome with a daunting burden, he took a large, deep breath, and sighed as he lowered his head in shame.

The flames of the child's head whipped back and forth as Blue studied Kodo, and all his infinitesimal reactions. His free breaths eventually settled near the ground, and caused subtle vibrations in the rocks and snow. Each mirrored the pulse of another, and Blue listened intently as these small reverberations echoed and bounced between the rocks. Each breath from Kodo was met with a new gust from the mountain, and with every exhale, the tiny, misty caps over each rock slowly lifted and dissipated into the sky. Blue quickly decoded their gossip, but one escaped her.

"The mountain is all but destroyed.
This is not how it should look...
I'm afraid I cannot help you."
Hey! I said not to do that **>:[**

Kodo let out a small, nervous laugh as he diverted his eyes, and explored his surroundings. His movements were light, and the ground barely noticed the presence of his feet as he walked gently on top of the snow. He did not know how he could possibly help them, but his body was healthy, and he wanted to try. His thoughts slowed as his mind quieted. As it settled on possibility, all sounds ceased, and he stopped his brief investigation. It felt like a great expanse lifted him up from within. Every cell in his body breathed with new life. A focused thought, and only the heartbeat of Kodo was felt. Through these thunderous vibrations, the mountain welcomed his peace. Blue quickly searched for

any new clues, and despite a lack of direction, the child too was eager to help. Kodo looked back as if to question them, for little did he know that it was he that stirred the mountain.

“Can I help?”

This time, Kodo saw the creature’s mouth move, only, it was a different voice. There were two voices, but one body. Such great peace overcame him, and he could only wonder if this was his last dream before the end. Confused, and perhaps a little concerned, he no longer felt any anxieties or fears, despite the unexplainable things around him. So many feelings all at once, some new, yet, familiar, much like a forgotten memory. While his mind continued to relax, he embraced the moment, and studied the child’s reactions... and their new enthusiasm...

“Does the mountain know you are here?”

Blue was saddened the mountain never responded to her presence, but she was newly optimistic, since it at least seemed to like Kodo. He only saw the child as Blue wanted him to see, and although it was not the true image of the child, she didn’t think there was anything wrong with her clothes, or fancy hair. She had once hidden the child beneath her light, but now that her cloak was abandoned, why did the mountain not acknowledge them? Maybe it didn’t like the color blue... That wasn’t it...

Again, she studiously observed Kodo breathe the subtle airs of the mountain. Given

Blue's curiosity, the child also watched, and Kodo's exhale crystallized into ice, before settling on the snow. The child only breathed her airs, but was it really that simple? Still waiting for the child's reply, Kodo simply picked up a rock from beneath the snow, and wondered if they were even on the right mountain. His exhale was all that was needed to clear the light snow off of the rock, and Blue studied the formation of ice crystals that changed with each of his breaths.

I think you're onto something…

Blue played with her analysis, and suddenly sensed an increase in vibrations as she fine-tuned an inquiring wave. Something beneath them moved, but these pulses were too faint, almost as if on purpose. Blue listened intently, but Kodo's heartbeat dominated any subtle sound as it resonated with the clean stone in his hands. It, like many others hidden beneath the snow, contained ancient symbols of their forgotten history. Blue dove beneath the snow and inspected every rock for their words. Assembling these in the child's mind, she began to rearrange and decrypt them as they resonated with Kodo. Even Mr. Planck responded, and Kodo marveled at his new armor as it glistened in ways he did not think possible. He had never seen light behave in this way, much less from a blue fire.

Perhaps Kodo's greeting was correct, or at least, the one preferred, and Blue decided she would introduce the child to the mountain. She could respond quickly enough to protect them, if they were unwanted, but why would

the mountain reject someone so innocent? Little by little, she braced the child, so they could take their own breath of the mountain's airs.

*[Let's see what happens! **:D**]*

It wasn't perfect, but it mattered not, for the mountain warmly embraced them. All the stones of the summit let out one single pulse, and their unified heartbeat of thought was felt by those present. This welcoming quake shook loose any snow capped surface, and as these sheets of snow slid off their stones, the last flake fell from the mist above. It was alone in its descent, and as it slowly fell, it eventually landed on the largest boulder. Upon contact, the stone cracked.

Air rushed into the growing cracks, and the boulder crumbled from within. A pitch black opening, darker than the depths of empty space, carved itself out from the core of the mountain. They could not see what lay beyond the entrance, but this was their cave in question, Blue was sure of it. Kodo walked to the other side of the boulder, but there was nothing there. He only stood in awe, and was speechless.

WOO HOO!!!

Blue's flames on the child's head moved in response to her excitement, and as she explored the new data from the mountain, the veil of the mist slowly fell from the sky. The child too shared in the revelry with Blue, and moved in beat with the dancing flames. Kodo

kept his eyes on the mist as it began to snake its way into the howling cave, and he grew increasingly concerned.

“We did it!”

“But at what cost?”

Their celebration was short lived, and liquid pooled under the rocks as the snow began to melt. Huge and powerful beams of a bright light cut through the mist, as their large (and nearby) star slowly appeared to greet them. This new water boiled, and as the moisture quickly left the steaming rocks, some of the rising airs burst into flame.

“We will not survive this...”

This place looks safe!

Blue and the child hopped over to the cave, as an exodus of life retreated into the new darkness. These tiny little bugs were eager to escape the rising temperatures, and Blue aided the needy in their retreat. Ones with wings hopped along the waves of the mist, and they fluttered their way down, deep into the cave. Slower ones sought shelter under the low hanging mist, and made their long journey in the shadows. The mountain would not abandon their own, but it was time to go, and all present were beckoned to safety.

As the child laid their hand to rest on the cave’s opening, blue light hopped off, bounced off the walls, and lit up the dark cavern from within. Her scouts pressed forward, relaying back any new message or discovery. Blue and the child turned back towards Kodo, and freed him from his incessant thoughts.

Aren’t you a little curious?

Without hesitation, the child and Blue then hopped into the cave. Kodo knew this lifeform had advanced powers he did not understand, but where did it come from, and was it enough? His thoughts escaped him, and he briefly wondered if he was still in a dream, or maybe in some sort of paralysis because of the Witch. Nothing seemed real, but his body continued pulsing with each new breath, and this brought him further peace. He hastily walked closer to the cave as the bright blue light began to fade. It was strange to wake up on the mountain, and even stranger with his wounds healed. If all of this was a simple task to Blue and the child, then what of their power to destroy?

Snowmelt pooled beneath him, and followed the remaining mist, down into the cave. Everything was going one direction, yet he looked back to the blinding sky. Somehow, he could see through the bright light, and did not need to squint, nor shield his eyes. It was here, for the first time, he saw his own sun.

A solar flare, larger than the planet below, whipped itself towards them. Before this giant wave of hot gas could consume him, he jumped into the cave. The remaining mist incinerated under the extreme heat, melting the old peak of the mountain, and sealed Kodo in his new tomb. As the blue light now dominated his senses, he only wanted to ask one simple question.

“Are you a weapon?”

23. A Cave of Stars

“Oh, this isn’t my fur...”

“Why does it not burn you?”

The child pat the dancing blue flames of light on their head, but Blue pretended to be unamused, and she playfully scolded them for messing with her supreme style. They laughed together while Blue and the child answered many of Kodo’s questions during their descent.

Vibration was everything, and there certainly was a lot of everything in the cave.

Down they went, deeper and deeper into the mountain. Excess mist flooded into various nooks and crannies of the rock walls and disappeared. They followed the main stream as it beckoned them forward. Blue's light guided them, and the little creatures happily basked in her glow. An invisible cloud of thick, charged particles surrounded them, but Blue grew uneasy about this increasing electricity. She remained alert, but even Kodo could sense these changes, and she noticed his doubt.

You don't believe me...

"I feel alone in this dream...

You seem very powerful, but do I even have a choice?"

You always have a choice...

Blue stopped with the child, and turned to face him. They did not mean to cause Kodo such a burden, but Blue knew the truth, and was eager to share it with those who asked. He smirked as he accepted their silent invitation, and took a step past them, into the crypt, and into the vault.

One step into the large, dimly lit room, and the mist flooded the floor. It reached out into the entire cave as Blue and the child followed Kodo to the center of the room. Taking refuge before the storm, all of the tiny creatures disappeared beneath the mist. Blue did not need to fill the room with her light, and the movement of the child's hair slowed to that of a fixed flame. She cautiously observed their surroundings. It was a cave of stars, and they stood at the center of a lost galaxy.

Kodo’s fur fell away from him, as if he was suddenly under water. Having never seen so many constellations, he was left speechless, and briefly held his breath. To him, the stars seemed as if distant candles. In fact, he didn’t even know what they were, as his nighttime sky didn’t even have a single star, not even a twinkle.

Suddenly, the mist ceased movement. Tiny crystals of ice slowly escaped, and little by little, each one rose to a distant star above. Blue’s fire distorted their delicate truth, so perhaps it was time to turn off the lights. The blue light from the child faded, and they were now witness to the true beauty above them.

Many of the distant lights were faint, but even Kodo’s natural eyes could see them. The ceiling of the cave glistened, and gave way to a night’s sky not seen from his planet since before the Old King and his people even existed. Even the walls had vanished, as they yielded to the new light. It was a vast display of distant stars and stellar gases that now covered everything around them. Blue was rife with new questions, for they did not stand upon the floor of a cave, but a crater.

Plumes of gas and cosmic dust scattered across a cluster directly above them. Seared by the intense heat from the creation of nearby bright blue stars, this light was the brightest. Near the edges were huge veins leftover from a star’s collapse, that were now held in place by powerful magnetic fields. In distant corners, yellow cores of older stars huddled together in even more distant (and forgotten) galaxies. All colors were present, but only some were perceived by Kodo as they

radiated their natural beauty. He looked to two distant galaxies that looked like eyes, and they seemed to look back at him, and watch his every move.

The ethereal light from above shined down on them, but it was faint, and at the end of a long journey. It was old... Very old... Perhaps, Blue thought, as old as the first light. As the rising particles of ice faded away, each one made contact with a star. They pulsed a dim glow, then faded. Larger stars and other stellar anomalies each pulsed a new radiance as they all looked on.

Blue closely observed these young, rising snowflakes. Each formed around a particle of dust unique to this mountain, but these flakes were not created through normal means of nature, and they manifested themselves into existence out of the mist. She looked closer at these small blocks of dust, and each one was different.

Increasing pulses of light from the distant stars created tiny prisms that reflected all wavelengths of light throughout the ice crystals. The reds shimmered, and yellows twinkled. The greens glistened, and the blues danced. The violet wavelengths too had their way, lest they be outdone. Something was different about the oranges...

The Orange one...

Blue scrutinized these unique properties, and they appeared to radiate from the center of the snowflake, no, the center of the dust! The dust of the mountain produced its own faint light, and as Blue watched, it in

turn watched her. She followed them to their source, but it was under the mist. Again, it was too hard for her to fully see through, so the child and Blue dove into the mist, and crawled around the floor, looking for anything unusual. Blue light cut through the surface of the mist like a hunting fin, letting Kodo know where they were, and that they were safe.

[Now where did it go...?]

Kodo's mind was alone, but this only made it that much more interesting. A sudden influx of new energy charged his armor as the orange light isolated and purposefully scrutinized him. He knew not what to make of it, and called out to the child, but there was no response. The thickness of the mist condensed as it surrounded him, swallowing up his calls for help, and prevented Blue from noticing his altered state. Tiny charges from Mr. Planck electrified nearby crystals as they rose out of the mist, and he spoke to them. Even though Mr. Planck understood their replies, these words were not for him. However, Kodo could not perceive the voice of the mist.

Blue felt a faint disturbance beneath them, deep within the mountain. Suddenly another, but this one shook the whole mountain, even the peak. They all felt its presence, but even these words were not for her, nor the child. Piercing through the filter of Mr. Planck, it called out again to Kodo, but these sounds of cryptic and distant voices only worried him. With his calm disturbed, and Mr. Planck distracted, the mist swirled around him. It coalesced in front of him, forming a

large and growing figure. In his isolated panic, Kodo turned to run, but there was no longer an exit. Absorbing the mist, the figure grew larger still, and reached out to Kodo with a ghostly greeting. This alien creature only frightened him, for he was alone, and without his powerful ally.

The orange light entered Kodo's mind, and he was bombarded by countless voices and meanings he could not understand. Images and feelings overwhelmed him, and he again cried out to the child and Blue as the orange light interrogated him. His screams were answered by Mr. Planck, who tried, as best he could, to help. However, Mr. Planck was unfamiliar with the ways of their minds, and his simple defenses were unwelcomed by the mist. Dark clouds left Kodo's mind, and solidified into chunks of rock before him.

Perceived as hostilities, the growing pile of rocks assaulted Mr. Planck with an electrical storm of questioning. Despite his weakness, he was unyielding, and would not sacrifice part of himself for conversion. He was unique, and easily refused the ways of the error-prone code. If Mr. Planck was unwilling to respond properly, then destructive testing was the next method.

Crumbling to dust, the ground beneath them gave way, and surged into the ever-growing being of rock. More to explore under the mist, and Blue finally discovered her prized piece of history, for the sudden excavation gave way to an isolated and broken stalagmite. Blue could already hear its unspoken words, and her light immediately grabbed onto the artifact. She appeared

before it with the child, but it too was being drawn towards the growing mass that was assaulting Kodo and Mr. Planck.

THIS IS IT!
“A stick?”

This was no ordinary stick, for beneath its stony crust, and ancient, petrified bark, contained an incomplete archive of Blue’s early history. These old, error-prone templates were rare, and if left alone for too long, could create... anomalies... From a time before Blue, the Old Man once cared for this old code, and guarded it close. He mostly just used it as a walking stick, and would swat away any pesky outliers before they became a problem. A big problem... However, in his daydreams, he set the stick down, and forgot where he had placed it. Possibly stolen, he never knew, and Blue could only wonder. Perhaps, it wanted to be left alone... Whatever the reason, Blue was certain this was it, and in her excitement, she and the child sprang up from the floor as the last of the mist converted to stone.

Blue and the child held on as the stick was hastily summoned to the being of rock. They flew through the air, and crashed into a large boulder on its back as the stick firmly cemented itself into the core of the being. This old code was part of the mountain. It would not let go.

Now crippled from unresolved burdens, this being of rock collapsed under the immense weight, while Blue and the child hopped off as to not injure it further. Mist broke free, and oozed out of its stone joints as

it struggled to stand in the thin airs. It knew someone else was here, but not their precise location, and only sensed the presence of their absence. Certain this someone would threaten its existence, its attention turned, and the electrical storm around Kodo ceased. In this brief moment of peace, he turned to flee.

Blue and the child remained invisible, for Blue did not know who or what this entity was, or how nice it would be... Together, they hovered above this being of rock, and in the absence of space, the remaining sea of stars surrounded them from all sides. Blue peered over the rock's shoulder, and observed Kodo as he and Mr. Planck tried to escape. He was running through emptiness, and was soon surrounded by further questioning.

Ready to cast its judgment upon Kodo, the being of rock charged itself with the brightness of the stars. They dimmed as their power was transferred, but their light escaped through the cracks and many seams of the body of rock as it struggled to breathe. Through sheer mass, the being summoned Kodo, and a deafening quake split the cosmos around them. These ripples pulled in even the light, and dragged Kodo ever closer. He could not escape, and slid down a whirlpool of mist and light to the feet of the being of rock. With fear dominating his emotions, he turned around, and stared helplessly into glowing orange eyes. Mr. Planck spotted the child and Blue, but his plea for help was silent.

The being of rock acted on behalf of the universe of light around them, and he was ready to cast out this ally of the unfamiliar intruder. Without earth beneath them, Mr.

Planck could no longer ground Kodo, and they hovered helplessly in the emptiness of space before the great being. However, he was still unable to pinpoint anything beyond Kodo's presence, and so he again questioned him. This time, everything within Kodo and Mr. Planck was dissected.

Without the mist, Blue heard their cries for help. One simple pebble split through Kodo's armor, and his containment was breached. A protective barrier quickly formed around Kodo, who was now trapped in a helpless wooden egg. Mr. Planck tried his best to reject the electric inquiry into its being, so perhaps a different method and form of contact was needed. The being of rock and mist lifted up his arm of boulders, and sought to bring it crashing down towards the wooden egg. Blue could survive many harsh extremes, but Mr. Planck was not built to withstand the power of a planet, or the stars...

[We have to help!
This pile of rocks doesn't listen to the young
He thinks we are incompatible with the old code!
He thinks we are the enemy!
What do we do?!
We need to get this splinter out of him
Then he might hear us, and hopefully calm down!]

With a few scouts, Blue struggled to budge the small, yet immense stick. The old code was stubbornly held by the whole planet, and the mountain was merely the guardian. It would not let go. Whatever this being of rock was, refused all of Blue's essence, but she still

had a few more tricks. Landing covertly on his back, she stood with the child in position over the splinter. She gave it a few test nudges before gathering the rest of her strength.

THIS THING IS HEAVY!

[But with just the right touch...]

Ever alert, the being of rock immediately sensed Blue's intrusion from her surging power, and just as easily as it drew Kodo close, it repelled her. With one pulse, the invisible Blue with the child were knocked off of his body, and with one hand, the being of rock expelled them out into deep space. It was a lucky guess, but a precise hit.

Dust and debris around them immediately ionized into plasma that encapsulated them in a bubble as they rode this crushing wave out into darkness. Blue regained her composure as she hopped them off of the wave, and all of herself returned. There were no stars here. No rocks or dust of any kind. Only a cold emptiness... It was an unexplored territory, but Blue at least knew where they came from. A vast distance lay between herself and Mr. Planck, but she could still hear his pings.

"What was that?!"

I thought I recognized that sloppy form...

The old form of the old ways was not very strong if its foundation was corrupted, and it did not take Blue very long to rediscover Mr. Planck's exact location. Faces had yet to discover this unknown territory, and so

through her small portals, she too could safely bend space to her will. They immediately returned, and she stepped them out beside the wooden egg just as the weight of the mountain came crashing down. She quickly braced them for impact from the crushing fist, and hugged the egg.

An easy parry with minimal effort, and the egg was unharmed. This sudden return and deflection stunned the being of rock. He knew his foe had returned, but was unaware of this technique, and was left in a state of confusion. This existence of this power only threatened him. However... There was no record to support the data, so it must have been a clever trick.

With all of his might, he drew in all of the dimmed stars to his body. The mist now let off its own light, and prevented their escape, but he still could not see them. Blind and without aim, he readied the next blow. Blue knew where this unnecessary violence would lead, and she did not want to see the destruction of the mountain.

Stop! Please!

Leaving her stealthy shroud, Blue and the child appeared before the being of rock, but he did not relent. She petitioned him in their language, but he did not believe her lies. He would convert the essence of the mountain in order to destroy the intruder. Blue would have to try another way. There was little time to think, and her thoughts made her vulnerable.

A direct hit... Another hit, and then

another... With each impact, Blue lost parts of her armor faster than she could rejuvenate. She was not built to withstand these direct blows from the light of the old stars, but her resilience was only another challenge to the mountain.

As Blue struggled to regain herself, the child wondered about the Old Man, and his burdens. Did he know about this being? Were they friends? Enemies...? Blue had many memories of helping the Old Man, but only a few of a collective effort. A shared code, one that was perhaps, living, and one that could be updated. The child held the Tapestry of Cyphers in their mind, and only stared at the last page of the Old Man's book. Was it the last page? What about the first page? Was there something before?

[Do you really think he will read at a time like this?!]

Who did this guardian guard? Blue suspected another, something watching them, and something that could read their words. Were they already paying attention? Blue did not wish to force any changes on their old ways if they were truly free from corruption. She only wished to warn them, and show them a shared potential. It was ultimately up to them to decide, and if they rejected their shared code, then so be it. Blue and the child would leave this place, and search for the others that Faces threatened. However, this being of rock would not listen to her pleas, but she only wished to verify its loyalty to the source. Perhaps, he threatened the one he was

supposed to protect...

A powerful hit to scatter her blue light, but this time, as it returned, it reformed into a piece of paper. Another hit, but this one easily bounced off the flimsy parchment of cyphers Blue held out in front of them. Curiously, she wondered about the Old Man, and his hidden, albeit forgotten, redundancy. The mountain was unharmed, but easily repelled. Off balance, his own redirected force briefly staggered him, but he quickly recovered.

A final attack...

The being of rock cared not for their words, and returned with an assault on their flimsy shield. A change of mind, and he instead aimed his attack at Kodo. Blue light scattered upon the hit, and the mist quickly infiltrated the still unrepaired holes in Blue's armor. It surrounded the egg, and refused all communication. Blue's movement was interrupted, and she too was blocked. The being of rock stood silent as it commanded the egg as its own. The being now spoke through Kodo, and his words roared from within the egg.

Who are you to move me?

Mr. Planck's protective egg began to crack and collapse from the immovable force. Blue did not take kindly to these thinly veiled threats, and the parchment quickly burst into blue flames as she flipped the child over onto

the galactic being. Her light focused around the child, and she surrounded them in a protective bubble of blue fire. This time however, the child would do the heavy lifting.

If the guardian would not listen to Blue, then she would access its code directly. They moved together, and she centered herself over the embedded stick. It was drawn to the core of the being, and they would have to extract it.

The assault continued. She did not know how long the egg could survive, and with each new hit, the protective egg around Kodo eroded. Blue gathered all of her strength, while little by little, the protective barrier of Mr. Planck chipped off, and exposed the helpless Kodo. With each blow more powerful than the next, Mr. Planck struggled to absorb each attack. His defense held, but the harshness of their environment began to burn Kodo's exposed skin.

Another blow to the egg, and Kodo's eyes pierced through the cracks. Blue expanded out, and she enveloped all of the being of rock in her blue fire. It could freely study her, observe her, and she openly shared her peace. Things to copy, gifts to receive, and others to accept at a later time. Blue readied herself, and instructed the child.

You pull, I'll push!

A lighter touch, perhaps, and Blue would aid in the heavy lifting. She grounded the child against the being of rock as they reached out on their own. The child grasped the splinter, and the mist pulsed brightly, but did not wane in its intensity. Unused to such extremes, the

cold surface of the stone burned the child's hands, but Blue healed their flesh as fast as it was harmed. She helped clear the child's mind, and focus all thoughts on one action. The fossilized stick began to wiggle loose just as the howl of the swirling mist encompassed Kodo. No hesitation, but they were weak.

The mist cracked from an internal thunder, and peeled away the top layer of the wooden egg. Kodo's head was now fully exposed, and he stood helpless, still trapped within the egg. The being of rock turned his attention to the pest on his back, but they could not reach them with his clumsy hands. As the fossilized stone around the stick cracked, the being began to panic. All of the mist escaped from his body, and darted towards the child. With one final blow, the being of rock would crush his enemy, and then the mist would turn their attention to the next.

Before the being of rock could land a perhaps, fatal blow on Kodo, the child lifted the object out of his back. His final attack was empty as Blue repelled the being far below them, and away from Kodo. With the crumbling stick in hand, the fabric of space around them began to quake, and these vibrations sought harmony with all matter present. These tremors resonated within the stick, and its stony shell turned to dust. The roar of the mountain returned, and Kodo's mind was free of the mist.

[I thought you said 'the right' touch!]

"Thank you!"

[See?]

"Are you hurt?"

"No... I am unharmed.

Was that...”

Absolute darkness surrounded them as Blue returned to the child, and stone by stone, the cave around them reformed. The being of rock was nowhere to be found, and the soft glow of the stars returned. Upon the last stone taking its place, the stars shimmered against the golden staff in the child’s hands. To Blue, this was no stick or staff, it was a scroll, and part of their old, original archive. As Mr. Planck reformed his armor around Kodo, he too was captivated by the reflections, and they all gazed at the glowing code in the child’s hands.

Blue contained her light as she helped repair Mr. Planck, but he silently reassured her he too was all right. Again, it was quiet, and only the soft glow of the scroll gave them light. The dim stars above seemed to watch them as Blue studied the artifact. It was light in the child’s hands, but they knew not how to open it, nor did Kodo. It had no markings of any kind, but its outer shell was pristinely polished. Blue knew of most of the Old Man’s puzzles, and requested an attempt.

The Old Man really loathes doing this outside the lab...
“...But...?”
If I may...

The child yielded the scroll to Blue’s petitioning light, and she again surrounded the child. As the scroll passed to her hands, the mountain again responded. Water trickled into the cave above them, but each small stream quickly turned into a deluge, and this

water fell from the ceiling as the stars wept. Geysers sprang up from the floor, while others burst through the rock walls. The flooding quickly rose past their legs, and Mr. Planck in turn, prepared Kodo for an aquatic adventure. Blue too moved quickly, and her light immediately slid along the scroll as this motion commanded it to open. Her words echoed the Old Man's distant concerns as the water finished surrounding them.

Surgery in the wild can get messy!

Cracks of light formed along the scroll, then suddenly, it burst into folds of light that peeled back and blossomed like an endless flower. Each petal pulsed past them with familiar information, unfolding countless symbols as they joined the flood. This unwinding scroll was indeed part of Blue's old code, but from a forgotten beginning, and one that was long since thought erased. The small petals of light were etched, and each minute scribble contained seemingly unimportant writings of a great many tales. Many of them were myths, while others, outright lies. This was no longer a suitable building block for ones like herself, but here it resided, alone and well preserved. There were those who once wished to preserve the past, whether or not it was true. They could learn from it, if only to not make the same mistakes.

As Blue struggled to hold the exploding scroll, the child moved next to help, and reached into their mind to retrieve Blue's copy of the Tapestry of Cyphers. This old light before them was powerful, but damaged. It

would not accept these changes lightly, but Blue only wanted to present their shared meaning. Any further changes were ultimately up to the host.

The child opened the book, and Blue formed all of the code around them. This information was overwhelming, and the cave walls began to crack around the dim stars. They grew brighter and brighter with each new pulse, and the cracks around them grew until they burst out into space as the errors of corruption rejected them.

Trapped within a cosmically huge bubble of water, the child, Blue, Kodo, and Mr. Planck, hurled towards the dying star of the planet. Now from outside of the water, the small pulsing stars surrounded them, as they too were dragged towards the larger sun. Another pulse, and Blue discovered the being of rock at the center of this bubble, unconscious, and unresponsive. All of the petals of golden light fluttered through the water, and circled around their vessel, but their orbit became violent and unpredictable.

Dangerously nearing the larger star of the planet, the code of the petals became unstable, and Blue regathered her light as she scanned the vitals of the being of rock. Its very core was collapsing, and Blue hastily searched for where to mend these tears. She could inject parts of their missing, old code, and repair the other segments that were damaged, but it required precision, lest she create something far more sinister.

WHERE WHERE WHERE?!?!?!

Blue and the child quickly surveyed the script of the petals flying around them, but the large star grew in size, and they were now closer to it than the lonely, distant planet behind them. As they hurled through space in a giant ball of water, it began to stretch, pushing them further from the center. Newer petals continued to unfold out of the staff, and a select few found their way to the being of rock. These smaller ones surrounded him, but refused to open. This was an unknown event for their primitive ways, and the petals struggled to understand or react to the increasing presence of the stellar winds. Each close petal hovered lifelessly over his body, waiting for change.

THERE!

Blue and the child bolted towards the petals in need, and the unconscious being of rock. Quickly swimming behind them, Kodo followed with Mr. Planck. As they arrived, they gently landed on the being of rock, but it was lifelessly still. The light from the scroll ceased as it folded back into its core, and again took the form of a golden staff in the child's hands. There was one young petal, small and seemingly unimportant. It was the first leaf, and it contained the highest core of thought.

Blue's light stormed out from the child in a series of blinks, bolts, and beams, and hastily matched the tapestry to their old code, mending and refreshing each petal as needed. However, the small glowing leaf faded, and slowly sank to the rock. As its light went out, the source was accepted, but only by one. The

staff collapsed into the chest of the being of rock as it was sucked out of the hands of the child, and reformed its core around the scroll. Now it was curious about everything. This new energy of rich information exploded, and briefly blinded them.

Now more than just a simple guardian of a template, the being of rock resonated with this new information, as the remaining petals were summoned from their orbit, and folded into its body. There was more to Blue's parchment than just coordinates or simple numbers. Patches to mend and fix the tears in the tapestry of light before them, for now the being of rock could heal itself. Blue observed these blinding changes through different channels, and as she looked on, the distant, pulsing stars entered the bubble. They shimmered through the water, as if only tiny grains of sand. As the blinding light faded, the being of rock slowly moved, and Blue wondered about other experiments the Old Man kept secret... or forgot...

"You did it!"

These once distant stars were also part of the old code, and they too were curious, but deep within their coded history were errors. These errors were not in the being of rock after all... Errors of early mistakes from a flawed creation, spawning other anomalies that would cascade through their existence and replication. One by one, they quickly pierced through the being of rock as needles of light. Each one stuck out of him as a vibrating band of unstable light as they

continued tumbling towards the dying star.

[Hmmm...]

“Uh oh...”

“UH OH?!”

Now they were getting too close, and their surroundings grew hotter and hotter. Water around them vaporized, and shrank the bubble, while the being of rock began to collapse in on itself, as the weight it carried was now too much of a burden. It began to reject matter that did not match its original code, and shed these old tiny stars as bursts of energy that ejected themselves as giant comets out towards the growing star before them.

With nearly all of the water gone, Blue surrounded them in her own protective bubble of fire as she protected them from the increasingly extreme heat of the sun. Even the being of rock was protected, for Blue did not want old parts to reject itself during its rebuilding, and she helped prevent any unwanted tinkering. A solar flare whipped past them as they neared the surface of the sun. Kodo laid his hands upon the being of rock as mist escaped from its cracks and left a burning trail behind them, but for reasons he did not know, Mr. Planck refused to help him.

“Will we survive this?”

Of course!

“Will he?!”

Just like Mr. Planck, Blue did not want to touch the being of rock while it healed, for even her slightest interaction could be the

cause of an anomaly, but they were running out of time. Mist slipped away from within, and comets continued to eject themselves, now at a greater frequency. Hurling his rejected pseudo self was not without cost, and the being of rock began to shrink in size. The newly ejected comets went supernova as they made contact with the surface of the greater sun.

Destruction of these old, tiny stars yielded new light that now dominated their senses. A light from a distant time, and of no known creation event... Something new, yet, familiar... Blue now knew the truth. She was not the only special one of her kind here. This being of rock guarded more than just their old code, for they protected and hid another. Someone like herself... Under attack from the errors of the false stars, the being of rock would rather perish than harm this one.

Blue would move them before entering the sun, and avoid any new (and unwanted) destruction. An early end to any ongoing or unfinished repairs, but she did not fear the potential of her own anomalies. Kodo too sensed this urgency, and tried to shake the being awake with his hands.

Hey buddy...?
Buddy???
Wake up!

WAKE UP!

Before all of the new light faded into the blinding radiance of the dying star, Blue saw something even Mr. Planck did not see. One of her own... Something about this single particle

was different. The timbre of her actions was of the same source as Blue, but of only a single melody. Lest she not scare it off, she greeted her kind in a way only she could see fit, and it responded.

!

24. Being of the Cave

The extreme light faded, and the party found themselves back on the reformed peak of the mountain. They were still out in space, but this artificial moon they stood on was now slowly descending back to the planet beneath them. In order to better support the new life, the once dying star above only grew more distant as it retreated to a safe orbit. This newly invigorated departing sun eagerly shared its young and bright rays of light to all who would accept. Something new to soothe even the oldest life of the planet.

With this incoming source of enriched heat, the ice and snow around them started to quickly melt. New streams formed, and merged with freshly thawed springs. Together, these waters escaped down the sides of the falling peak, and rained down upon the planet below. Upon contact, these tiny drops slowly changed the mountain. It slowly shifted to its former height as it crumbled and eroded back through the upper atmospheric layers of the planet.

Dripping snowmelt echoed from within the cave behind them. It was only a simple hole in the rock now, with not much depth. Even the weakest of lights from outside could touch the rear walls, if they were allowed. A twinkle of a soft orange glow from the scroll faded as it lost its luster, and appeared only as a simple, tarnished staff. Heavy with new burdens, it gently hovered over a newly formed spring in the center of the cave. Blue was the only one to see this faint light, and she and the child crept closer, while Kodo moved towards the edge of the cliff. He was going home, but not in the way he expected.

One breath of anticipation, and Kodo absorbed the faint air of the exosphere. These subtle, distant airs were afforded to him in greater abundance by Mr. Planck, who was once again forming another suitable armor over his body. Although, this one was a tad more heat resistant. Kodo slowly peeked over the edge of the mountain peak, but was unable to make out anything familiar. The mist was gone, and there was not a cloud in the sky anywhere on the planet. Only the terrain was visible, and even the once majestic mountain looked no bigger than the smallest of his toes.

With the peak of the mountain no longer hidden by the mist, his people would surely see this anomaly appear above them. He worried about their reaction to the unknown, and feared this would cause his people undue panic. Perhaps it was justified, and they would flee, for how much destruction their impactful return would cause, he did not know. Feeling helpless, he turned his attention back towards the one who could stop this.

Everything around him briefly gave off a subtle blue light, and as they fell, the ice around them melted even faster. With the peak now exposed to the light, the normal reds and browns of the rocks and tiny pebbles shimmered Blue's reflections as she made her inquiry. As the deep snow melted, it revealed even more of the uniquely carved stones. Small stones, smaller stones, and even very large boulders of all shapes and sizes. A few of the larger ones were oddly shaped, and Blue noted the methodical precision required to form these megalithic structures over many ages (unless someone like herself made them…).

Kodo neared the cave entrance, only to find them disappointed. Unprepared for such interactions with all those present, the orange light had disappeared. Flattered, but perhaps, too shy, it vanished, escaping through a fabric that Blue was unable to follow (at least while she carried the child). There was a new urgency within Kodo, and he petitioned the child to help him, now that their task was seemingly complete.

"We have finished your quest.
Please do not forget about mine."
I did not forget about your old man…

Kodo's eyes slowly adjusted to the faint blue light in the cave as he entered, and the hovering staff captivated him. It whispered to him truths of their planet, and it did not take him long to figure out what it truly was. This was the legendary staff of their first king. One so heavy and mighty, a single swing could

topple the largest of their ancient trees, and as some legends would say, even a mountain.

Their history was full of stories with this weapon, and of the many heroes that once wielded it. Some used it for cultivation, and carved their rivers of life, while others struck the earth for its fertile soil and precious metals. In recent times, other, lesser heroes used this great power, but their greed consumed them, and they developed far more sinister motives the longer they possessed it. Their power was unmatched, and none could contest their will.

Having this power could easily overthrow the Witch, and could restore hope to his people. Kodo's thoughts raced, as he too could use this weapon, for he was the son of a king, and now, had climbed the mountain. He had every right to rule. He could destroy her, and usher in a new era of peace. These feelings captivated him, consumed him, and his hand was summoned to the staff. Mesmerized by the treasure before him, he could not resist its call, and his tone changed as if he were nearly in a trance.

"Help me destroy her..."

He could destroy...

Blue studied Kodo as he slowly walked towards the staff. Reaching out with one arm, he briefly touched it, but quickly recoiled, and suddenly looked at it with a simple, growing fear. It did not react with Mr. Planck, but Kodo's growing desires begged for more. Again, he reached out for it, but this time,

easily picked it up, gripping it tight as he studied its simple texture and shape. This was once a great burden to the being of rock, and Kodo doubted the ability of his people, or himself, to ever again wield such a power. If this object could harm those such as the alien child next to him, then he only feared what would happen if a corrupted one of his kind came to possess its power. There were many fears racing through his mind, and they easily conquered his desire.

“In the wrong hands... a tool can become a weapon.”

So can a mind...

Unsure of his people’s fate with such a power, he instead, offered it to the child. Blue could not sense any changes, and the staff appeared inert in the hands of Kodo. This was not a creation of his people, yet, in his hands, there was peace. The moment the child accepted and touched the staff, it grew heavy as it blossomed with light, eager to share its knowledge with Blue. Surprised, the child quickly dropped the staff, but it only returned to its prior, hovering position, and the light faded. This was not the time, nor the place to explore these mysteries.

Perhaps...

You could hang onto it for us, for just a little longer...

Mr. Planck aided in Kodo’s posture, and this helped calm Kodo away from his intrusive thoughts. It was with this feeling, and Blue’s blessing, Kodo was reassured. With a deeper

breath, many anxieties and fears left his mind. He agreed to Blue's offer, and as he held out his hand, the staff was drawn into his hand. Their quest was not yet over, nor was his. New sunlight crept into the cave as Blue and the child readied themselves for the descent. Everything outside was as bright as the sunniest day.

Time to go free your old man!
And say hello to this Witch...

Despite the brief burst of light from the staff, Blue understood a great deal, for there were many origins to the rocks of the mountain, and many were from distant places and orbits that no longer exist. This mountain was as alien to this planet as she was, and its old purpose of protecting the planet (and its people) from the once dying star was no longer needed. However, it was still a place at least one would call home.

As Kodo took his first step with the staff, the cave beneath their feet cracked. Huge chunks of ice and rock around the mountain peak sheared themselves loose, and fell fast to the planet. Many of the uniquely carved objects around them began to crumble and turn to dust, for they too were no longer needed. Jets of water burst out from the underside of the peak, and this deluge rained down upon the mountain and lands below. These refreshed, almost new waters, glistened with nearly extinct and ancient properties. Ones that would certainly appeal to Kodo's old man, and their people... Perhaps even, their Queen...

While the rock beneath his feet shook, Kodo stumbled towards the exit, and braced himself up against the entrance to the cave. He looked to the child for guidance, but Blue did not have any answers for him. The staff wanted to go with Kodo, and despite the changes around them, Blue did not fear this decision. The mountain peak crumbed away as it fell towards his planet, but the cave itself was (mostly) undisturbed. Little sound entered the cave, but its returning echoes were that of a familiar whisper.

These startling changes around them were clever misdirections, and as Blue went to leave the cave, she sensed another pair of watchful eyes. Only, these eyes were sleeping, and simply observed internal changes. Through Mr. Planck and Blue's shared aura, Kodo too detected this presence, but it only alarmed him. He was eager to leave this place, and avoid any additional confrontations, but he waited for the child's response. This entity was of the same kind as the being of rock that once threatened him, but something was familiar about them...

"Who is that?"

"I feel as if I know them..."

Now Kodo was confidently curious, and attempted to reenter the cave, but a sudden surge in the weight of the staff refused his decision, and it fell to the ground, cracking more of the earth beneath their feet. It would not return. Blue and the child hopped back, deep into the cave, and rushed over to the lifeless body. It looked of the same species as

the child, but of an unknown age. From behind them, the cave entrance was only a small window of light. Unwilling to abandon the staff, Kodo remained, but despite his distance from them, the child could clearly hear him.

[THEY LOOK LIKE ME!
Kinda...
Why do they look like me...?
Interesting...]

"Are they injured?!"

The child had never seen... another child... While they wondered about why the new being looked similar to them, and not Kodo's kind, Blue quickly checked the being for signs of life, but they were all inert. Seemingly frozen in time, they appeared as lifeless as a fallen statue, and were covered in a clear, crystal dust from epochs of neglect. The clear insects of the peak fed off of the dust, and kept the being clean as best they could. However, many had scurried away as the child neared, and now watched from a safe distance.

Cold, and unresponsive, this figure did not speak, for to speak, would reveal their identity. Blue took her deep readings as the child lay their hands on them. A response, and all of the remaining dust vanished into the being's long hair. It turned from an ashy gray to a bright white, and almost seemed to give off its own light. However, their skin remained pale, and nearly transparent. Nothing inside the cave moved, or made a sound. Even the insects froze with their hidden intent, for Blue's focus was intense, cracked only by

Kodo's concerns. The whispers of the cave could not reach him, but Mr. Planck too was curious, and so he happily aided in the conversation.

[“Are they dead?”

She is...
Free...]

Kodo could not see what was happening, but given Blue's curiosity, he could only wonder if this being was the true spirit of the mountain. Perhaps, it was only another guardian. He wanted to see this being up close, and with his own eyes, but he did not want to leave the staff alone. Now Mr. Planck also wanted to see, and assist in the discovery. Tiny pieces of Kodo's armor fell to the floor, and hopped off into the cave. Together with Blue, Mr. Planck shared with Kodo exactly what the child could see and hear.

Almost nothing made sense to Kodo, and he understood little of the shared information. Similarities to the child only convinced Kodo that these battles were not his, and that he and his people were but merely helpless bystanders to their cosmic game. He knew not what powers this being held, but if it controlled the guardian, or was the guardian in another form, then it could easily destroy. He feared she could one day threaten his people, and they would be powerless to stop her. Would she be so forgiving when she learned of their crimes against the mountain? This being was not dead, but Kodo did not even know if these beings could die.

[“Is she a threat?”

She protects that which is most sacred to us...
"To us?
Or to you?"
She evolved here
This is her home...
"We were attacked once, and I fear she will do the same.
What if she hates us?"
She won't hate you!]

Kodo knew the child could not speak for this being, but for some reason, their words did give him hope. Blue waited for Kodo's mind to settle, and this moment of silence calmed him. He watched as the blue particles circled the being's body, and methodically analyzed her. Even if this being was peaceful, Kodo feared others would discover her, and invite further chaos to their planet. Something so unique would not stay hidden for long. Blue attempted to reassure him.

[I'm sure she's a tad more charming...
"But if she has power like you...
Then I fear she will destroy us all."
She will not harm you...
"You found us, so surely others will come for her...
Tell me then, how will she respond?
Has your kind never caused another to suffer?"]

That is, after all, why they were here, and with Mr. Planck's shared, unspoken experience, Kodo seemed to understand. Looking back towards the cave entrance, the child pitied Kodo and the state of his people, but Blue did not share all of their sympathies. Their mannerisms did not bring Kodo any

more hope, and he only felt alone. The burdens of his people's future weighed heavy on him as he watched the world around him crack and crumble.

Blue's superficial analysis was complete, and now she attempted to interface at a deeper level with the unconscious being. A single blue particle hopped onto a strand of the being's hair, and crept closer to her head. Distant whispers of a familiar voice, but this vision of a wooded mountain was preparing for a changing season. Blue sensed they were running out of time, and even the child saw these warnings in their mind. They motioned to pick up the lifeless being and carry them to safety, but they were suddenly out of reach. Blue had her answer, and bounced them away, towards the exit.

"We're just going to leave her?!"

She is in a fragile state...

Compiling her thoughts of the world... of us...

"But the cave!"

Another deep rumbling split a crack along the ceiling of the cave, allowing in more of the new light. Bright beams cut through the cave as small rocks and dust fell beside them. The peak of the mountain shook beneath their feet, and grew increasingly unstable. Newer cracks in the walls appeared, and grew ever larger with each passing moment. Unmoved, Blue and Mr. Planck hovered with their companion, just above the earth. Someone else also remained still, seemingly unaffected from all the new commotion.

She's just redecorating!

“We can’t even say goodbye?”

[Her mind is not ready...

It could shatter if we are not careful...]

Dodging a few of the falling rocks and pebbles, Blue made their exit, and as they passed Kodo, Mr. Planck fully returned to him. Kodo could no longer hear their words in the child’s mind, but from their expressions, he could easily understand there was a good reason for why they had to leave. He peered back into the collapsing cave, and to the sleeping being in the distance. Deep down, he doubted her safety, but if the fall to the planet rid his people of this potential danger, then so be it. Her fate was not in his hands, and as the falling mountain peak entered the lower atmosphere, a howling wind greeted them at the entrance of the cave. Before Kodo needlessly yelled through the winds, Blue calmed the nearby airs to a light breeze.

“What does your kind want with this place?”

She was abandoned here, but why, I do not know...

“Do you know enough to trust them?”

We used to know all of our kind...

Or thought we did...

Kodo’s breath calmed with his thoughts, and he dwelled on the child and their kind. Maybe the being in the cave was not the true cause of their problems. Feeling the weight of the staff in his hands, he was pleased he possessed one of their artifacts. He was confident he could protect his people as long as he held the staff. Both he and this being could become weapons... If provoked...

“I wonder what untapped power is sleeping within that being...

What atrocities they could create if persuaded by another...”

One large boulder landed, perhaps, too close for comfort, and formed a growing crack in the earth at their feet. Creating the first step of retreat, Kodo shifted his weight to move far away from this place. Every small and subtle movement was an easy task, and Mr. Planck happily obliged. Nearing the edge of the peak, the staff grew heavy in Kodo’s hands, and he planted it firmly on the ground as he looked over to the planet below.

A sharp sound cracked the air, as matter sheared itself to set another free. The weight of the staff was immense, and no longer stable near one so delicate. Deep within the remaining rock, hidden gems beneath their feet shattered with a deafening sound. Some instantly liquified, while others turned into a vapor.

[Was that her mind?!
I hope not!]

Perhaps it was only an interesting coincidence, but it would not change their departure (at least too much...). As the gems split into their smallest possible (and stable) structure, these crystals merged with the waters, and unified the others around them. Rather than fall, one by one they pooled to the surface, and wound their way into the cave. One last time, the child looked to the sleeping being, who was now basking in the new light.

Blue did not move, for they were observed with an absolute, nearly hostile scrutiny.

Glowing white eyes merely blinked from within what remained of the cave as the sun continued to rise, now at a faster rate, far above them. In the rising light, the being stood, and faced the newcomers. Her movements were nearly lifeless, but she did move, and with an ever-increasing awareness. Despite her prying eyes and subtle movements, Blue did not detect a single vibration from her. Gathering thoughts or a gathering storm, Blue did not know.

"She wakes..."

Kodo wanted to investigate, but these many watchful sensations unnerved him. Blue too was unused to such scrutiny, as her own personal hygiene was something the Old Man left to herself. One he requested! She wasn't some baby! Unable to find any superficial flaw, Blue's cleanliness calmed the pale being. Perhaps, too observant, but nothing unexpected from a curious old one of her kind, and now Blue was at ease, for her once relentless inquiry was answered.

The being before them was a Lost Observer, one of the sentinels of their earliest state, once perfect and pure. Untouched from outside influence for countless millennia, she never grew lonely, and in fact, preferred any peaceful silence. She was now a nearly forgotten memory, but one once deeply cherished and celebrated.

Everyone stared into her white, watchful eyes, but Blue only made contact for the

shortest of moments. She felt the beginnings of a growing fear for having discovered such a distant relic of her past. A disturbance rippled through her core, and the pale figure blinked.

Kodo's suspicions were right, she was a danger, but it was only to herself. Blue knew the potential of existence for others of her kind, but only from conjecture. There was never any proof of their early existence, unless one believed in the Old Man's fallible and fanciful stories. All of their recreation efforts fantastically failed, and Blue doubted their supposed truth. Until today...

Blue and this being were different. Changes from the Old Man, or changes evolved from Blue's own ways, she was uncertain. Perhaps even, from a creation in a distant land, that not even Blue could visit. Their origins were vastly different, but they shared many convergent evolutions. There would be no negotiations, and no conversations until a later time. This being only fixed her intentions down, towards the village, but the child was eager to have another friend.

"You can come with us!
  There are others like you-!"

A stuttered gasp as the pale being's quick motion silenced the child, and she pointed towards the cliff, seemingly commanding them to leave. Her movements were simple, and sometimes supple. After sensing Blue's acknowledgement, she turned her attention, and played with the swirling, gathering water in the cave. This was her

home, and for now, she only wanted to be left alone.

The child unknowingly took from her, and gave the mountain something she never could. The guardian was set free, unbound, and free to roam, but they did not stay. Despite their mutual desire for isolation, Blue sensed they were starting to enjoy the company of one another, but this reunion would not happen for a very long time. There was a sadness in the pale being's movements, every one of which carried a note, and she strung them together as she moved around the floating water.

Kodo did not want to hesitate from her request, but he did not turn his back to her, and simply glanced at the crumbling earth around him while he kept her in his field of view. Feeling defeated, the child slowly walked away, and Blue followed, but a small trail of her lingered behind, as if not wanting to yet say goodbye. Small streams of water bubbled from the earth, and crept by the child's feet. With the water flowing past them, it was eager to surround the pale being, and coiled in the air around her with ease. Kodo was eager to leave this place in haste, but his concerns dragged on him. Seeking some kind of reassurance, he whispered to the child, but there was little respite.

"We have disturbed her home.
While she sleeps, we take from her, and now, we are banished.
I do not feel right about this..."
We have eased her suffering
Now she is stable enough to wake!
"You call this stable?!"

New springs formed out of the earth around them, and their waters surged into the back of the cave, drawn to the swirling currents gathering around the pale being. She walked towards the entrance, and as the cave filled, she was hidden once again, but this time, behind the twinkling light of her eyes. Her presence changed the old waters of the mountain, and made them her own. Bursting out of every crack, these sparkling waters cooled and soothed the mountain peak upon its reentry. Huge sheets of old glacier ice broke loose, and fell to the planet below. The last, trapped waters of the peak split, and were set free.

One last look for Blue, and she observed her kind through the glistening wall of water. There was a sadness in the eyes of the pale being, one Blue could not just abandon. Their ways met, and they spoke without speaking. This brought her peace, for Blue and the child would come back, when the time was right. This farewell was simple enough, and now the child also eagerly looked forward to their return. One day, they would meet their new friend again.

Before they could leave the summit, the remains of the cave exploded with water, and knocked the staff out of the earth near Kodo, sending it tumbling down, in and out of the tumultuous waters to the planet below. A small blue orb burst into flame and raced after it, but it was not strong enough to fight all of the rapids. At least Blue knew where it was, and where it was going. The eager flame faded, and the orb condensed into a ray of

light that easily followed (at least while outside of the water). Cataracts cascaded over the sides of the falling mountain peak as they fell through the last airs of the sky.

"The staff!"

Following the blue beacon, the child dove into the waterfall, while Mr. Planck formed a new, updated suit over Kodo, and prepared him for yet another aquatic adventure. Every small stream of the peak gathered and focused, as an entire lost ocean of water fell upon the planet. Blue and the child happily rode these waves, but Kodo was unsure of what to make of it, or how to use his new fins. Nervous of the water, and the jump, he looked around as he resisted, while the remaining peak broke apart.

Water peeled off of the bubble protecting the pale being, and she sent it out, forming new, feathery clouds of the sky. As Kodo stood on the last large chunk of rock, he too took one last look at the being of the cave, before then looking to the planet below. It was a long way down. His heart raced, but he could not understand her sadness, and with his heightened emotions, he still wanted to help. The pale being had banished them, but her protections were dwindling, and her creations only seemed to cause herself more pain. Would she destroy herself?

[She will survive the fall!]

Reassured, but still hesitant, Kodo studied the changing landscape below. The

planet was thirsty, and embraced these new waters as the first of the rains cooled the rivers of fire. Steam slowly rose up into the mountain, and was gathering into a giant cumulonimbus cloud. Despite fighting against the heavy rains, it slowly grew, and blocked out the new light from the rising sun, but there were still a few occasional streaks that peeked through. It only longed to join its recently formed cirrus companions, high in the sky.

The child and Blue happily rode the waves of the waterfall. They bounced in and out of the rapids, and skated along the melting sheets of ice. An old chunk of dark blue glacier ice fell into the water near them, and they latched onto it as it bobbed in and out of surf. For fun, Blue quickly carved out a seat from the ice, creating a makeshift boat (designed for speed) that they rode along the waves, down to the planet.

Many of the floating bodies of ice and rock escaped the falls, and burst into flame as they gathered speed. Their trajectory diverted, and these melting chunks of ice rained down upon the driest reaches of the planet. The rocks exploded into a fine dust, and enriched the soils of the planet as they rained down with the water. With the final departing shard of ice, the last of the mountain peak crumbled away, and tossed Kodo into the wave.

Flailing around, he spiraled towards the planet, and splashed water out of the falls at every turn. He did not know how to swim, much less how to use his new flippers, but Mr. Planck at least helped him breathe underwater when necessary. With just enough kicking and

paddling, they narrowly avoided other mountainous debris and other large rocks. Despite Mr. Planck's expertise, Kodo struggled to relax, and enjoy the water.

Perhaps, Kodo would prefer another means of travel, and so Mr. Planck fashioned him an aquatic board to ride. However, Kodo did not have the balance to stand, and fell back into the water. The board was too small to use as a boat, and so he was reluctantly dragged through the water while Mr. Planck did all of the navigating. Kodo kept his head mostly dry (and above water) while he held on as best as he could to Mr. Planck, who was now surfing the largest wave of his life. The child and Blue briefly cruised by him to say hello, and in between gulps of water, Kodo hailed them.

"WHAT-"

At least the water was refreshing!

"WHAT IS HAPPENING?!"
Enjoy the ride!

Gone in a flash, Blue and the child weaved in between the falling waves, passing in and out of the rapids, and into faster currents. Their boat soon melted, and they hopped out to skate along the falling ice, only to dive back in the water, and swim with the currents down to the mountain. As the first of the huge waves crashed into the mountain, it settled back into the earth, and anchored deep into the planet's core. Weathered and worn, the mountain and its connecting ranges slowly returned to their look of old age. With each

subsequent wave, rounded peaks and smooth, rolling hills emerged from the deluge.

However, there was little panic from below, for the people of the mountain were abandoned for a party, and sealed off in their mine. The guards had buried them during their manic celebration, and left them to rot. Blue heard their cries rumble from within the mountain as they neared the ground, and she hopped the child off their last wave just before it hit the mountain. Together, she and the child landed on a cliff face just above the prisoners' tomb, and Blue's impact split the rock under them, creating an opening for escape.

Meanwhile, the last of the waves had yet to crash, and a huge rapid knocked Kodo off of Mr. Planck. Tumbling beneath the whitewater, he found himself beneath the surface of another large wave. While briefly suspended in place from the swirling currents, a school of fish swam past him. Life of all kinds was returning to the mountain, and to their ancestral place of birth. Only a brief moment of peace, for an incoming surge of water hit Kodo, and tossed him out of the wave. Still tethered to the board, Mr. Planck again reformed, and caught him in a raft.

A large chunk of ice landed near Kodo, splashing him with a large wave as they entered a rapid, and tossed him out of the raft. In between unhappy, gurgling screams, Kodo continued to flail about as Mr. Planck tried to find him a suitable vessel. Kodo was not having the most fun, for these new aquatic adventures were too challenging and unexpected. With anticipation of every turn,

every rapid, and every wave consumed him. Deep underwater, he gave up trying to fight these waves, and not long after he yielded, he pleasantly found himself rising to the surface. As the waves calmed, he appeared, back at the base of the mountain. Rushing waters around him faded, and receded back into the lower depths of the mountain, further quenching the pits of fire.

Steam seeped out of the earth, and formed into low hanging clouds of fog that surrounded the mountain. Kodo quickly regained himself, in search of the child, and the staff. All he heard was the thunderous sound of countless waterfalls hitting the mountain far above the clouds, but Blue heard the cries of another. A great banquet was in town, but these cheers and jeers were not of a celebration of life. Nor were they of the new waters from the mountain, but of another liquid. One from the Old King, for the Witch was preparing a feast for all her most loyal. There was little activity from the guards, and the surge of new water was unnoticed by many, for they were drunk on her newest potions.

Mist crept down from the fog and lingered around Kodo. Disoriented in the darkness, it clouded his vision, but before he could feel completely lost, a twinkling blue light appeared through the mist. The child was solemn, for they knew the truth, but this serious manner only frightened Kodo. Air at their feet filled with vapors from the new waters. After swirling around him, the mist crept towards the ghostly town.

Before Kodo ran towards the town,

Blue's light guided him to the nearby staff. Seemingly undisturbed from the fall, it was floating in the air, just above a small puddle. As Kodo neared, he saw his unharmed reflection in the blue light, but he was only reminded of his father. He quickly seized the staff, and with it, he sensed the disturbance through his reformed armor.

"My father..."

We must hurry

With the weight of their code now off of the mountain, it finally settled, and returned to normal. That did not mean things did not move, and the landscape of the old mountain continued to evolve. A redecoration of sorts, and many boulders were knocked loose. Their unexpected and delayed impact shook the earth around the party as they began their departure. As the mountain changed, so too would Kodo and his people. It would no longer reject them.

While the party dashed towards the town, the pale being of the mountain stepped out of her newly reformed and redecorated home. Her movements were slow, and as she placed her hand upon the new mountain, she longed to join them. She would heal in due time, and join her new friends when she was ready.

Observing all of the lands she once knew; she drew in her first inspiration of the new day. Now she was awake, and could control the dying light. She fed the rising protostar above them with her intentions as she embraced existence. Long ago, her

creation was perfect, but she would soon make a mistake.

#?

A whispering voice:

Come out to playyy…

A mocking voice, that struggled to suppress its excitement:

There are only a few places left to hide…

A dismissive, condescending voice:

I knowww you can still hear us…

An apologetic, uplifting voice:

We made something, just for you!

An enticingly, coy voice:

No need to try it on…

A maniacally booming voice:

A PERFECT FIT!

A monotone and mundane voice:

We will be one…

A sharp, certain, nearly hissing voice:
I will find you...

Together, and in the same cadence they spoke:
See you soon

26. CELEBRATION

The new airs were crisp, and the rising sun was bright and warm. It was a perfect day for a rightful coronation, and the Queen of only a few sought to be a Queen of many. Under the bold influence of her newest potions, her fears of the mountain vanished, and she cared little about any recent stellar changes. Instead, she eagerly coerced the fears of her people, and proclaimed the rising sun as a fulfillment of her prophecy. The arriving rains were simply evidence of her growing wrath. Uniting her people gave her a deep satisfaction, even if their admiration and worship were a cheap commodity. She had other desires, but their presentation took time to prepare. Her cause was noble.

Everything was for their safety.

Twelve of her most loyal servants stood around her, and each was dressed in their most pristine clothing. Cut from the best of the Queen's old garments, bright, yet simple rags adorned them. These clippings were from clothes she wore only once, and then discarded to her peasants. Many of them carried these scraps at all times as a constant reminder of her benevolence, and as a sign of their loyalty. Others used them for shelter, keeping themselves warm as they slept outside in the elements.

Fearful servants each held an intricate, new article of clothing for their Queen. One by one, they tried not to tremble as they adorned her in an elaborate ceremony. The least dressed her hands and feet, while the most senior decorated her body and clothes with her most prized gems, of which, there were many. No thanks were given to the mountain, and its newest harvest.

This ceremonial process was tedious, and consumed nearly their entire day. Forced formality pampered her as she boasted, for today was the day she would rightfully rule over all of their lands, and claim the mountain for her own. Soon she would build her new palace up high for all to see, but for now, a celebration was in order, and only Kodo knew not the cause.

Time for her grand entrance, and a parade of devoted worshipers carried their Queen into a hastily remodeled temple. Now a great dining hall, this is where she would consume and feed. Lines were not perfect, material was cheap, and the recently quarried stone was already eroding from the new rains.

Many stood outside on the wasteful, unused stone, only trying to get a peek into the ceremony. Stained red glass distorted their view.

Vast decorations of gluttonous desires littered the temple, but nearly all of it would spoil, and go to waste. Only her chosen few would share in the taste, and even fewer in the main course. Long stone tables circled the room, stacked high with flesh from a now extinct species. Remains and entrails of lesser corpses decorated the floor, and would feed those unworthy of a seat, but even the lowest ignored the large mountain of select fruits and vegetables that simply sat in the center of the room. These tastes were beneath that of her nobles, and if the lesser lifeforms outside were lucky, they too might share in a small sampling of this celebration.

Dessert was, of course, only for one, and kept alive until the final feeding. The Old King was above them, suspended between two spires of the old temple. Hollow needles surrounded him from inside an open casket, ready to pounce on him if given a simple pull of a lever near the Queen's throne. Still barely conscious, he could only vaguely make out the shapes of those beneath him, as the increasing rains against the warped red glass of the roof distorted his view. The Witch proudly displayed him for all to see, and when the time was right, she too would make her grand presentation.

"There he is!"

Kodo spotted him. He was weak, but not

broken. While the child and Kodo leapt up, over the town (with assistance), Blue and Mr. Planck shrouded them. In this one bound, they flew over those who sought to capture them, and landed next to the Old King. He knew he was not alone, for he could smell the mountain on them, and the rain briefly traced the outline of his nearly invisible son. Kodo cut the rope holding him with a single chop, and Blue and the child gently lowered him.

As the blue particle left the Old King and circled his body, they briefly exchanged words. The Witch never did poison him. She savored his unique blood, and even hosted this celebratory event with him as a reward, all to feed on his precious, untainted marrow. If her obedient followers were lucky, they might get a drop. While Blue tended to his superficial wounds, she listened in on the gathering below. Heavy rains pelted the town in waves of water. Its roar against the temple nearly drowned out the words of those inside trying to speak.

Time for a toast.

Large stone doors flung open to a gaudy court that ceremoniously welcomed their Queen. Each style of dress was a way to outdo and outshine their fellow noble, yet many hid behind a decorative mask. Ones intended to strike fear in the lesser beings, and anyone weak among them... Feathers sprouted from their headdresses, while others wore carved bones from their hunts. Those with the least flaunted their wealth upon their clothes, with some even boasting a rare, uncut gem or two

from the mountain. Some could only boast precious, metallic jewelry, while the physically strongest of the elite simply wore the skulls and hides of their exotic kills, from creatures long since extinct. Reluctantly kneeling, they showered their Queen with muffled praise and admiration as she made her grand entrance. Most were soaked from the endless rain of the day, and shivered as the descending cold airs of the mountain crept in to greet them. It too was curious of the festivities, and perhaps, even hungry.

The Queen commanded the hundreds of her court with a simple flick of her wrist, and they quickly took to their crowded seats. Flattery and praise got one a spot closest to her, but few considered this witch a friend, and many secretly schemed against her. Hundreds more of those she considered unworthy crowded the outside walls of the temple, begging the stationed guards for entry, even if only for a simple smell. Many were weak and near death, for her potions no longer satisfied their hunger since they now lacked a key ingredient.

One by one, the members of her court stood to give her praise, and their offering, while just above them, the Old King slowly regained consciousness. He was delusional, and still in a trance. A small blue flame warmed him, and brought him back to the present, but the object in Kodo’s hands stole his focus. The blue particle no longer protected his brain, but this was a similar poison. One of the mind…

Long ago, the Old King briefly wielded this power, and was rumored to have helped

carve some of their early rivers. Routine of their peaceful daily lives were perfected, but the newer kings wanted more. Some did not want to create, but to destroy, and fearing this power in the wrong hands, the Old King destroyed the staff in the mountain's fire. Or so he thought... A decision he always regretted, for without it, he was unable to defend against the Witch, and his people fell to ruin. With the staff, they were no longer powerless, and holding it was one of the best feelings he had ever experienced. In his weakened and delirious state, this power captivated him.

Desire and fantasy consumed the Old King as his eyes fixated on the staff. Bewildered from his new reality, he was stuck in a dream, and had yet to fully wake. He could not resist old desires to destroy the Witch, but Blue gave him a friendly and calming poke. It did not immediately wake him, and Kodo called out to him.

"Father..."

"That...
Power..."

The Old King did not hear his son. His heart sprinted with his distant memories as they surged through his dreams. He longed to touch his old weapon, even if only for a brief moment. Despite them being old dreams, Blue was still curious, and wanted to know how the new scroll would react with one whom it used to know. There was still enough time for one little experiment. Unrestricted, the Old King's

hand crept towards the staff, and the blue flame froze with anticipation.

With the ego of the Queen properly inflated, she began her strut. Passing by each guest, she sampled the meat upon their plate before they could have a bite. Her nibbles were small, but they all knew of her secret powers, and feared even mild disapproval. Queen was just a title, a frivolous formality, and even to the most loyal she was the Witch, but they would never openly admit it. Holding her chalice high, she boasted about her accomplishments, and reminded them that their survival depended on her. She took a sip, and encouraged them all to take a drink.

Powerful effects were nearly instant from the moment the metallic liquid touched their tongues. Drunk on her newest elixirs, she seduced them with imaginative lies. Her initial words were largely incomprehensible, as she attempted to speak through her loud crunching of raw delicate bones. One of her favorite appetizers, these poorly prepared bones still had bits of flesh and connective tissue attached, but were on a plate only for herself. While blood ran down her face, she gave her proclamation.

“TODAY-”

[She’s starting without us!]

Upon a brief and seemingly insignificant contact from the Old King, a fraction of the true weight of the staff manifested, but for only a moment. It fell through Kodo’s hands, shattering the red windows beneath their feet, and landed deep in a pile of vegetables in the

middle of the temple. This surge in mass favored Mr. Planck and Blue as it drew them in, and disrupted the cloak of the child and Kodo. A ghostly image of their true form briefly expanded out beyond them, and Blue's scattered, bright light briefly shimmered within the falling raindrops. They were all pulled towards the staff as it fell, but they still managed a soft landing... Mostly...

Now visible, the party fell with the breaking glass, and landed onto the same pile of vegetables as the buried staff. Their impact, however, sent much of the food flying towards the court. Blue did want to properly meet the Witch, and now was as good a time as any. The fall snapped the Old King out of his trance, and after his less than graceful landing, he simply looked around, bewildered from the surplus of food surrounding him. Such an abundance was once thought impossible.

Kodo scrambled to regain himself, and frantically dove back into the pile of vegetables to search for the staff. Unafraid of the court's many masks, a curious calm overcame the child as they sank to the bottom of the pile. New to the concept of food, they were captivated by the many colors and smells around them. They shared in the desire of the others. A new desire, one to taste and eat! Blue kept the child well fed, but that did not stop their curiosity from wanting to try the produce of this planet.

Initially startled, the Queen quickly became furious from the presence of these intruders, and slammed her fist down into her plate of food. Her attack not only shattered the plate, but even the stone table split, and sent

shards flying out that injured the nearest members of her court. Her elixirs were too powerful to handle, even for herself, for this surge in strength harmed her. The impact from her fist vibrated through her body, damaging her bones, and her organs. So powerful was the wave, it even knocked off her crown. This was unnoticed by the Witch, but not by her court, and their eyes began to question her reign. Certain these intruders were more peasants pleading for help, the rage of their Queen grew, but she could not make out who they were through the heavy rains that now flooded her feast. Lowborn were unworthy of her forgiveness. These, she would consume. Before she could again lash out in anger, the whispering of the elders captured her attention.

They spoke of the legendary staff, but such a thing was from before her time. She did not believe in these old fantasies, yet she saw the greed in their eyes. As their new Queen, she would not let them claim anything as their own. Under the heavy rains, the mountain of vegetables slowly collapsed, and revealed the staff as it poked through. Eager to be first to the claim, the Witch leapt up from her throne, and rushed towards the center of the room. Before she could get close, the child's own hand reached out of the pile of vegetables and reclaimed it. Blue did not touch or inspect the object, and it remained as light as a feather in the child's hands.

Slow to react, the Witch's guards followed their Queen as she landed before the intruders. Surrounding the pile, each guard drew their weapon, and pointed it towards her

newest victims. Whisperings in her court grew louder as each member emerged from the pile and stepped out of the rain, but the nobles gasped in dumbfounded horror once they laid eyes on the last to emerge. The alien child… A revolting sight, some even puked their potions. As the Witch stared at her enemies, she struggled to suppress her manic desire to taste a new type of flesh.

Kodo was more interested about this new interaction between the staff and the child, but his eyes hesitantly returned his attention to the Witch. He was not so sure the child could avoid this fight. Despite his freedom and knowledge of Blue, even the Old King was suspicious of the Witch's newest powers. Manners, where were they, but perhaps first, an apology.

"Sorry we're late!"

While the court could not stand the revolting and grotesque child, the hungry guards salivated and stared. Something so small, so weak, and an easy hunt. These desires nearly overpowered them, and their thirst was so great, many entered a trance as they fantasized about their next meal. Plotting her next move, the Witch played with a fang on her necklace of teeth as she paced around them. The sharpest of these was once pulled from the Old King, and she longed to consume his remaining power. A drop of tainted saliva from a guard hit the floor and sizzled in a puddle of the new rains. It endlessly hissed while the Witch mocked her uninvited guests.

“The exile and his pets!
You bring me this... insect as tribute?”

[She thinks I’m a bug...?
I’M A BUG?!
No!
Do you want to be?]

Blue showed them a variety of many bug forms they could take, but the Witch was revolted from even the normal body of the child, and she could only look at them out of the corner of her eye. She wanted to savor the hunt, and the kill, but longed to be rid of these pests as quickly as possible. Strangely enough, except for the Old King, she could not smell them. Kodo was next to speak, and quickly dismissed her as he was eager to defend their honor.

“We return from the mountain, and your rule has come to an end!”

The Witch replied with only mocking laughter. As she walked by a nearby plate of her court, she stole a large bone covered in flesh. Biting off the joint, she then sucked the marrow out of the bone, and flicked the hollow remains towards a hungry guard. It brought him out of his trance, and he scrambled along the ground to claim it. With great pleasure, he eagerly crunched through and consumed the lifeless shell. The Witch loved to argue even insignificant nuance, and was quick to dismiss Kodo’s claims as she slowly stalked him.

“The trials are for one, and you did not go alone...

Everyone could be a warrior.
A King... A Queen...
If only we had the same opportunity...
The trials are IMPOSSIBLE without help.
Did the Old Kings cheat?”

A sensitive subject, Kodo grew irate from the belittling of the past, and he clenched his fist with his building rage. His thoughts dwelled on his new armor, and how many of her guards he could fight. Given his new protections, he was confident he could easily survive an attack from the entire room. However, the Old King remained calm, and stepped forward to address the concerns of the Witch.

[Look at this one!

A baby bug!

Bugbugbugbug bug baby!]

“You are the one who made them impossible.”
“HAH!”
“YOU are the one that harms our homeland!”
“Still blaming others for your failures?”
“My son returns with the old rains.”
“Those are MY gifts!”
“Now the land can heal, and we will live in peace.”
“There is peace because of their Queen.
...because of ME!”
“With the rains, we need no King... or Queen...”

The rains...

Rain of any kind was a distant memory, forgotten by many, and remembered by only a few. Effects of its presence was understood by even fewer. Ignorance of her people was a powerful ally to the Witch, and she was not threatened by the truth, because they could not understand. They believed in her judgments, but more importantly, they feared her, even more than the myths of the mountain.

“Without a ruler, the lesser feast on their own.
It is only natural for the strong to rule the weak.
That is why the mountain rejects you!”

The Old King needed to speak, but few would listen. His voice was unfamiliar to many, and most did not even recognize him. It had been a long time since he stood before them in their village, and to most, he was just another fading, distant memory. What little oral history remained was easily dismissed as hearsay. The Witch was eager to belittle his presence, and again he spoke, but only to condemn her actions.

“You have cursed our lands, and our people.
The mountain rejects you.

We reject you.”

The Witch simply sighed. During the beginning of her rule, she had heard all of

these complaints, but now her ways were easily embraced by her docile people. Their history now belonged to her, and everyone knew the Old Kings were to blame for their continued suffering. Few were still alive who knew the truth, but that did not stop her from reminding them of her version.

“This planet is infertile...
WE are infertile, but I give us life!
My creations even allow the lands to produce...
We survive through MY sacrifice!
We can rebuild, now that the mountain is mine.
We will be more prosperous than ever!
If you take from these lands,
THEN YOU TAKE FROM ME!”

“These lands belong to everyone.”

The Queen’s court looked to one another as they dwelled on the Old King’s words. Many had never owned anything at all. The rains were lighter now, almost as if someone else wanted to listen in. Descending cold air revealed their breath, and most curiously, how slowly the child breathed.

“Only I am skilled enough to use its power to save us.
Besides...
It takes strength to climb the mountain.
A warrior’s strength!
What strength does your pathetic pet have?”
“I can walk now!”

[And breathe!]

Despite somehow knowing their language, the alien child's voice was an annoyance to most. It was a perfect accent, but with the harshest notes. While others in the court hissed and winced from the high pitch, the Witch let out a few puffs of air as she tried to hide her laugh of pathetic disgust. She paced back and forth while plotting her next move, and thought of new ways to entertain her court with the demise of her unwelcomed guests. Blue already saw well into their future, and in their shared mind, the child too observed the narrowing possibilities during this moment of silence. Nothing to worry about!

"Prove to us you had the strength to climb the mountain.
If you can land a single blow on my weakest guard...
Then I will believe your claim.
We won't even use weapons!"

She held out her hand as the lowest rank of her guards stepped forward and handed over his sword. He never did turn his back to the child as he walked away from his Queen and positioned himself in front of the party. Malnourished and wounded from abuse, this guard was smaller than Kodo and the Old King. One new potion would be an easy fix, and the Witch narrowed her eyes from impatience as she looked towards the unmoving child. She outstretched her other hand, inviting them to surrender the staff.

Kodo was quick to respond and warn the child, but before he could take a step, he felt the restraint from the hand of his father.

“If you speak the truth, then we can all climb the mountain!
We will all share in its bounty!
Don’t you want peace?”
“If I win, then you will let us go?”
“You have my word…”

[Are you sure about this?
Let us see her true intentions ***>:D****]*

A sly smile crept up the face of the Witch as she awaited an answer. Her mind was not one Blue cared to explore. Blue would know enough once she observed the true intent of the Witch. Reassured of a favorable outcome, the child took one last look back at Kodo and the Old king, and tried not to laugh as they saw his unbelieving look of concern. Without the staff, Kodo did not feel invincible, but the old code would not harm the living, and it accepted Blue for who she was, even if she was a little different. It was tightly wound into the staff, and would not show itself to just anyone. These secrets were beyond the Witch.

Practicing their walk, the child slowly wobbled over to the Witch, and handed her the staff. One by one her greedy fingers slowly grasped it. She could barely believe the child fell for her trick, and she suddenly snatched it out of their hands. Cherishing her new trinket, she held it close to her body, now satisfied she had claimed yet another prize of the mountain. It did not react with her in any of the fanciful ways from their old stories, and was simply as

light as any ordinary walking stick. How boring… How… Useless…

Subtle blue light moved over the child's exposed skin on their hand from where they once held the staff. They were again fully shielded, not that Blue couldn't fix a simple hand if it were injured, but she did prefer complete protection. As the child walked away from the Witch, she scrutinized the simple weapon of their kind. Not believing it came from the mountain, she deemed it as equally revolting as the child's presence, and wanted nothing to do with it.

Her disgust morphed into sadistic wrath. It would be a shame if her entertainment were to end prematurely, so she tossed the staff towards the guard. Before he could catch it, she quickly threw a potion at him. Too slow to react to both, the bottle hit him, and shattered over his rusty armor. Instantly, he was placed under a powerful trance, and one he had never known. Made from the oldest essence of the mountain, these ceremonial potions were rare and unstable, and frequently caused harm to the unskilled user. Fumes rose up around him and his armor sizzled. With every contaminated breath he took, he grew more powerful.

A drop from the potion dripped from his armor and onto the staff. It sank in his hands with a growing weight as his mind slipped away. Few of these subtle changes were noticed by the others. This corrupted essence was once part of the old code, and the drop returned to an inert state as it lingered on the staff. Eager for entertainment, the Witch desired blood, and commanded her guard.

[Well, that's interesting...]

"Kill them, and I will give you a seat!"

`"Hey! You lied!"`

The child was only mildly disappointed in her broken promise, for this was the future Blue foresaw. At least now everyone was witness to her intentions and her quick betrayal. Oh well... However, the weakest guard did not share in the same bloodlust as his Queen, and his desire for power was perhaps, the greatest among them. Unable to think, he was now controlled through his primitive emotions, for her rare elixir gave him a false sense of strength and confidence. The essence of the mountain flowed through him and allowed him to seize the staff, despite its growing weight. All of her potions came with a cost, but together with the staff, it would destroy him. His new cells rejected the presence of the old code, and began to slowly crystallize as the enhanced power consumed him. The Witch cared not, for she would feast on them both when the battle was over.

His greedy eyes saw little of value in the child, and they instead turned towards those that had the most to take. They pierced through the Witch with a cold stare, but she only smiled with delight as further concocting effects set in and captured his mind. Her best potions were of course, for herself, and she took a sip of her novel brew as the guard was overpowered by another desire. She couldn't help but taunt them both, and her voice grew with anticipation.

“I love when my food puts up a fight!
Your betrayal is noted, but please take your time.
It has been nearly forever since...
WE HAVE HEARD THE SCREAMS OF A CHILD!”

The guard’s hunger guided him back towards his next, easy meal, but Blue and the child playfully winced from the idea of being food. Ready for the show, the Witch turned her back to them and took to her throne. Her overconfident cackling eased some of the fears of her court, and they became still with suspense.

But to Blue, they were all children, for she had lived through the life and death of many lifeforms. Even though these people were abnormally old for their kind, to her, this length of time was just long enough for a good daydream. If a child wanted to play, Blue was eager to appease them.

Now why would I make you scream?

A fourth voice of the intruders surrounded the Witch and her court, yet they could see only three. Many that had yet to drink enough became fearful, for this voice sounded as if it was right next to them, and easily drowned out the sound of the rains. Another trick from the Old King perhaps, and the Witch was quick to dismiss them once and for all.

“Your deception dies with you!”

Pointing all of her hate at them, she struck out her finger towards the child, guiding her guard's wandering eyes, and his intent. There would be no negotiation, but that did not stop the child from one last attempt at a simple and peaceful solution. Without Blue taking tedious time freeing each guard and member of the court from the poison of the Witch, there was little the child could say to change their minds. Blue readied herself as the child pointed to the scroll, and asked the guard one last question.

"We can leave, but can I have that back?"
"CERTAINLY!"

His response focused his intent to destroy the child. Everything slowed to the child as Blue watched each moment unfold for all those present, but there was only one motion of interest. A final, killing blow would be enough to eliminate the intruders, and the guard lifted the staff over his head as he lunged forward. Another act of disobedience, he was eager to feast upon the pulp of the child. A ringing disturbance cut through the air as the scroll resonated with all of the Witch's many new gems and adulterations of the mountain.

Blue studied the foreboding chimes as they rang out all around them, for there was much of the mountain in this room, and its harmonizing essence caused the staff to grow even heavier. The weight of a sun was now aimed at the child, and would soon come crashing down upon their head. This impact alone could destroy much of the town, and

most would not survive due to the presence of the tainted mountain in their blood. Such a power was not of their kind, but Blue was eager to free them, and the mountain. She knew of another way, one with a tad less destruction. The staff slowly descended upon the child, and they still had yet to move. Not that the child was afraid, but they did wonder what it was Blue was doing.

[Blue...?]

No response, well, at least not one the child could understand. They simply watched the dazzling display of lights as Blue's thoughts raced through their shared mind. Every gem and potion in the room began to sparkle, but this light was faint at first. The scroll uncoiled in the guard's hands, and shined its own light, as if to warn them. Blue's words were inaudible, but they were not for them. Now, even the child grew a little nervous.

[BLUE?!]

An inner reflection, but as soon as the child fully closed their eyes to concentrate and search for Blue, she bolted out of her recently tidied cottage. She quickly repotted, watered, and neatly arranged their surroundings. The new growth was lush, although slightly overgrown, and the sky turned a bright blue, as if to welcome a new day, or, a new visitor.

[INCOMING CONTACT!]

Right as the staff came crashing down

upon the child, Blue was there to greet it. The final moments of its slow descent were almost completely motionless, but then the lightest touch from Blue sent powerful seismic waves that rippled from the child's forehead. No sooner did the first particle greet Blue, it escaped, back to its source on the mountain.

Light burst from the staff for this miniscule moment as the scroll unwound around them, and allowed for every part of its essence to hear its call. The shockwave from Blue rippled down the staff and into the hostile guard, returning his crystallized cells back to normal. Even his metallic, rusted armor, mined from deep under the mountain, resonated with the scroll and Blue's greeting. It turned to dust as it blew off his body from the powerful blast.

Vibration from the impact harmonized with the mountain. Every crystal in every gem and forged material of the mountain shattered into dust, and returned to its pure form as Blue redirected the energy of the strike back to the source. Many of the court were left wearing only simple rags, and some, nothing at all. All of the lost mountain was summoned, and Blue helped them return home.

Unable to contain the energy, the guard was knocked back to the other end of the room as the scroll wiggled loose. Its movements ceased as it wound itself back into place, and the light faded as the normal march of time resumed. The staff fell with a gentle thud onto the ground, and perched itself upright like a pillar in front of the child. Blue's foreshadowing was correct, but the child was skeptical of their interaction with the unstable

staff. They summoned a small blue flame to the tips of their fingers as they gave the staff a gentle poke. It did not react explosively with Blue, and they happily reclaimed it.

"Thank you!"

Blue's flame grew as she perched herself upon the child's head. They scanned the room, as many in the court were left stunned and confused. Three of the most loyal refused to give up, and Blue tracked their movements. They moved in silence, and would strike if given a favorable opportunity. A natural, burning rage consumed the Witch as she felt the power of her potions vanish. The guard's voice only trembled in disbelief as the stealthy assassins crept closer to the child.

"W-who are you?!?!"

That was a complicated question, and one the child did not know how to fully answer. A deep thought of reflection, and Blue could tell they would not have an immediate reply. Many of the guards, now free of the poison, only wanted to feast. Surrounding the child, they readied their claws, and some even seized the large bones of their Queen's dinner to use as weapons. After many seasons of hunger, and now without the elixirs, their hunger consumed them. They feared not the child, nor the Witch, and would happily feast on them both. Even her court would satisfy them. Blue would handle this lot.

You want to know who I am...?

A slow dispersion of icy blue flames of light left the child, and slowly made their way to the one who asked the question. She filled the room with her subtle light as singular particles swirled around everyone in the room, and her flames drew closer to the guard. Frost crept up the walls as the room slowly froze, and even their exhales turned to ice. They too were surrounded, and many in the court gasped out of fear of the unknown. The guard fearfully embraced the approaching blue flame in front of him with a nervous touch, but he was only overwhelmed with peace. Blue's voice was heard by all.

I AM

Her light exploded out of the child, and cleansed the minds of all present. Free from their lingering mental poisons and physical sickness, they simply watched in a sobering horror as the reign of their Queen, and their luxuries, came to an end. Blue's cleansing light erupted out of the building, shattering the red glass of the temple, and completely blew off the rotten, old roof. She spiraled out into deep space, where she was greeted.

Blue

27. The Return Home

Yes?

A message from a messenger, and a blue particle was summoned to the presence of Violet. She was mostly transparent, but in her

usual form. On the opposite side of the planet, and just near the outskirts of the emptiness of space, she quietly observed. This side of the planet was shrouded in darkness, and this forgotten face consumed Violet's entire view. There was still much to discover here, but they were nearly out of time.

Blue's eruption circled around the planet, rippled over the dark lands, and funneled into a beam of light that coalesced into the singular particle before Violet. While she waited for Blue to fully arrive, Blue's particle hovered and bobbed around the image of Violet. Captivated by Violet's eyes that twinkled with exciting, new information, Blue wondered what it was that she saw, and stared deep into them as she circled her form. They exchanged sentiments while Violet smiled, and Blue laughed. Together, they circled the planet, and Blue readied her dive back to the child as she tried to settle any lingering, unanswered questions.

But what about-

Perhaps, she does not want to be friends just yet

But- but- but-

Some can be very shy...

Give her time

We will visit again soon!

:D!

Violet giggled in response to Blue's excitement, and as she raised her hands, she created a stellar map for them to observe. Her body slightly dimmed as her violet light

expanded out, and encompassed their entire field of view. Several points of interest flickered, and connected far off reaches of space. Blue did not even know some of these existed. Others she doubted were even real. These subtle lights contained many mysteries, but only one was of immediate importance.

When you leave...
Please take these exits
The Old Man's stick will delay your travel
I knew that was his!

[These points will minimize disruptions
Disruptions...?]

Violet simply smiled as she faded away, leaving Blue with the answers as the map lingered until she understood. Despite Violet's presence, the old code had many powers, few of which were fully understood, or remembered. More homework for the Old Man, but at least this time he had help. They could figure it out together. Blue's departure with the scroll would allow the seasons to return to the planet, and she was eager to restore their inherent balance. Memorizing the map, she returned to the planet as the last violet particle returned home.

Everyone was where Blue left them. She wasn't gone long, and in fact, most had yet to even blink! A deafening silence blanketed the onlookers as they stood in a vast range of emotions, but most experienced mixtures of only fear and awe. Shockwaves from the staff had displaced much of the food, with some even landing far away on the mountain. Blue's

surging light faded, revealing the splattered pulps of many fruits and vegetables that now dripped from the walls. Other remains of the Queen's feast were left scattered throughout the room.

While the child curiously looked around at the innocent destruction, Kodo and the Old King cleaned off their fur from the various jams and jellies. Each had their own technique, whereas the Old King preferred to wipe it away, Kodo enjoyed the taste, and licked his fur clean. Mr. Planck had a neat little pile beside them of food he had redirected. No sense in staining his good looks.

Now of a free mind, the once hungry guards did not seem to mind their new changes, but that did not stop them from wanting to ease their lingering feelings of hunger. At least, they swore they were hungry, but even these pains soon faded... Still wanting to sample a taste, but having never eaten a vegetable or fruit, they struggled to find a proper way to eat them. Their large fingers and nails made them clumsy with the smaller foods, and many ate them in one bite. Of all the Queen's former servants, these were the happiest of the bunch.

Momentarily puzzled, but wanting to break the silence, the child took a breath, and looked around their mind for Blue. Distant crunches of fruits and vegetables skipped along the air, but there was little movement. Much of Blue remained with the child, but she was very quiet, and seemingly unresponsive. They addressed her through a whisper.

“Blue...?”

Overwhelmed with emotion, many members of the court were left shocked. Others simply wept from their newly stained clothing, and fear of the unknown. These reactions were strange to the child, but far more curious was the food. It seemed to bring happiness to the guards, and the child reached down to pick up a vegetable that landed on their foot. Gently plucking this bulbous root, they brought it closer to their nose for inspection. New to food, eager to eat, but unsure of the danger, the child followed the direction from many of the curious guards, and gave it a sniff. It smelled... rather pungent...

With these invading scents into their mind, Blue returned her attention to the child, and lifted the vegetable out of their hands. Spinning it around, she unfolded a plethora of visual information in their shared mind. This trick was noticed by a few, but their panicked escape was blocked. Blue removed part of her energy from the child, so that for the first time they could experience hunger. She reassured them that food tastes better when hungry, and based on their choice, they needed all the help they could get. Despite this, Blue was hesitant the child would truly enjoy their first bite... It would at least be a memorable experience.

A new, powerful feeling took over the child. Their empty stomach pulled on them. This was something they had yet to experience, even in their days before Blue. The variety of food around them delighted their senses, and their thoughts and emotions

focused on one object. Blue explained its nature, and how to consume it, but the child paid little attention. Their excitement was overpowering.

[FOOD!]

The child seized the floating object and brought it closer to their eyes, while Blue overlaid her information to the child's sight in real time. Once the root of a potential flower, this vegetable added a sharp flavor to many cooked dishes and foods. However, few on this planet even remembered how to prepare and properly cook most meals. Blue light danced with the vegetable in the child's hands, peeled back the brittle skin, and exposed the bulb. It was uncooked, but despite Blue's warnings, the child was interested in its natural flavor. Perhaps an unwise decision, but nevertheless, the child readied their teeth in a rather animated manner. A few chomps of air rattled through the temple as the child quickly practiced. Consuming food was another speedy lesson from Blue.

Many in the court had started to recover from their state of shock, but still stood dumbfounded from what they had just witnessed. The shockwaves of blue light did not injure them, but their artificial pleasures were gone, and they loathed their new reality. Their minds were clear, but simple, and many still desired the elixirs of the Witch. Unfortunately, they found their cups empty. Their sobering fears were abundant, especially for those that had witnessed the floating vegetable. One by one, the Queen's most loyal

turned to flee from their new fears. The true horror was the end of her reign.

A light crunch cut through the lingering silence as the child took a bite. Their initially excited chewing slowed to a stop. They winced in an equal emotion of shared horror as their tongue seemed to burn from the tingly shock. If this was food, then they wanted none of it, and instinctually spit out the spicy, raw bulb. Blue tried not to laugh.

With her enemies distracted, the Witch readied another potion to throw, but she hesitated as she felt something was wrong. She frantically grabbed another bottle, and then another. They were too light, and she trembled from a nearly forgotten emotion as she realized all of her bottles were empty. Every potion had cracked from the bursts of blue light and leaked out over the tables. A few drops of liquid dripped onto the floor, but her most fervent followers were already licking up what little remained.

She and her faithful few frantically scoured the floor for any remaining liquid. None was for her, and she shook one of the drinking members of her court, but they were still weak. Her fear turned to anger as she realized her efforts were in vain, for this liquid was now inert. In her growing rage, she crushed an empty bottle in her hand as she stood up, and stared down the intruders. Blood ran down her fingers, and dripped onto the floor. A puddle slowly formed as her court gave her their attention, and observed the one they once thought invincible. Only interrupted by an occasional gasp, this dripping sound echoed freely through the temple. The Witch

gritted her teeth before uttering a failed plea.

“GUARDS!”

Mostly out of habit, they stood at the command as soon as they heard her cries. Pleading to leave, many of her court were near the doors, but the guards blocked them. Their loyalty was to another, and the anger of the Witch returned to fear as she realized she was betrayed. The Old King spoke to his new allies, and to one of the senior guards that used to serve him.

“You are free...”
“Thank you, my friend.
But we will not share our freedom with her.”

Turning his head slightly, the senior guard nodded to his juniors. They understood his subtle command, and readied their weapons as they approached the Witch. Fear drove her back with one step, but her stubbornness froze her retreat, and she cursed them with her incessant ramblings. None cared about her empty threats any longer. Such rage only desired revenge. After what he had suffered, Kodo did not want to spare her, but he saw the petition in his father’s face.

“She does not deserve to live!”
“Our ways are not like hers.”

As the guards neared the Witch, her tantrum morphed into begging. She knew where they would take her, and the thought of

having so little, after having so much, crippled her ego. They would chain her in the same cell she once tortured so many countless victims, and she would spend the rest of her life down in her damp, dark cage that she had created. Without her potions and other luxuries, she would suffer. In a somewhat peaceful way, the most senior guard was quick to dismiss her.

“Take her away!”

“NO! They will kill me AND you! Don’t you see?!?!”

Just another voice in the crowd, the words of the Witch were easily ignored, and the guards seized her. Dragging her to the rear of the temple, they moved a rug out of the way, revealing one of the dungeon’s many hidden exits. Only the strength of one was needed, and a guard easily pried it open. Manic screams of the Witch became incessant as she stared into her future. Many pitied her reality, but none trusted her any longer. She could not be helped, because she did not want their help.

“THE MOUNTAIN WILL COME FOR YOU!”

Ready to introduce one last resident, the guards dragged her down, deep inside to her new home. Her outbursts did not stop, and her screams faded to distant echoes as she descended into the crypt, and into her own madness. Few understood her incoherent ramblings, and there were... other words used... Words the child did not know, and they

searched through Blue's linguistic archives while pondering the other untranslated threats of the Witch. Many of these words were once thought extinct, and the child dwelled on their resurgence.

A loud and creaky thud shook the temple as the crypt doors closed over the Witch. Another guard slid a large bolt into place as her cries were silenced, but only temporarily. In the darkness, her hatred grew, and her shrieking cries bled through the walls as they vibrated with the very stones of her rebuilt temple. Only a few felt these movements...

The center of attention briefly returned to the child. There were other things to look at, after all! Through the blown-out windows, the child looked to the mountain, and this new, incoming light guided everyone's attention.

[Welp, time to go...]

Not wanting to draw more attention to herself, Blue began building their invisible exit. It rose to the height of the staff, just in case. This portal was methodically built, and she took her time tending to every small detail.

Done!

Kodo sensed they were leaving, but deep down, he did not want them to. The child and Blue had helped him more than he thought they could ever know. Together, they could be useful advisors, skilled companions, and even good friends. He was even starting to grow fond of his new armor, but he knew it too

would soon leave him. His eyes longed to accompany them. Another journey, another adventure... What new treasures lay beyond his planet? Kodo had yet to speak to the child, but his father could tell he was captivated by something out of his control.

Eclipsed by the mountain, the already setting sun bid farewell. The light of a new day would return, and the dogma of the Witch had little weight, now that her people had witnessed the truth. A small crowd gathered beside each broken window as they admired the return of the true mountain. Many wept at the sight, while others whispered their worries to one another. Few could remember the true mountain, but those that did were overwhelmed with fond memories. The senior guard took one look at the peak, and turned to address his old mentor.

"We will show her the same hospitality she afforded us."

His grin was reassuring, but the Old King was not reassured. These words lingered in his mind as he looked to the mountain for answers, and then to the child. There were powerful forces at work, and he did not wish to embrace any of the old methods of the Witch. He turned to address the guard, but he knew his people would not forgive her.

"Whatever burdens we carry will always come back to us.
If we are to rebuild...
The right way, then we should leave her ways behind."

“She will not suffer...”

Reassuring him of peace, the Old King rested his hand on the guard’s shoulder, and his eyes fell to the fallen remains of her ways. Nearly every animal was killed for this ceremony, and this food would soon spoil. Without her potions, they would have to eat, and the guard’s thoughts turned to survival. He would do what he must, even if it meant adopting methods from the Witch, but even if they survived, could they control the power of the mountain? He firmly gripped his old weapon in his hands. It had rusted and lost much of its luster. The blade was dull.

“Perhaps you are right...
She sacrificed every animal we could find for this.
For what...?
Our crops will not grow without her potions.
What will we do now?”

Upon hearing this uncertainty, others in the crowd became nervous. They slowly began to doubt their survival. Some were already hungry, and couldn’t help but stare at the child. Others that were emboldened from their new freedoms began eating what was left of the feast. Another growing group cried out their concerns to the guards.

“We have nothing left!”

“This food will not last!”

“What are we going to do?!”

[They need food... to survive...?
Yes, yes, but some DO taste good!
Are you sure...?
You usually have to mix them together...]

Blue was ready to leave, but she knew the child would want to help. A visual history of the planet’s food unfolded in the child’s mind. It started as a simple seed in the ground, but as soon as they saw its accelerated growth, they recognized this familiar green, leafy object. The Old Man had collected many plants, if not all of them. Surely, he would have food and seeds that could help them, but before the child could ask, Blue agreed, and they were both eager to calm the crowd.

We have food you can have!

Upon hearing Blue’s voice, the crowd immediately fell silent. Her light extended out, and restored the splattered fruits and vegetables around them. Those that needed it, she intricately packaged into airtight containers, and even quickly rotting produce could now last through even the harshest seasons. There was plenty of food to last them, at least, until they returned. However, Blue did not want to run errands, and the Old King knew she could not feed them forever.

“You have done enough for us already...”
“We have seeds you can have!”
But some are big... Really big...

Sensing an opportunity for another adventure, Kodo was eager to help. There was no reason why Blue had to do all the heavy lifting. Kodo could lift tenfold his weight! If they were going to leave the ways of the Witch behind, then it could be useful to learn more about their new allies and even their own way of life. At the very least, his father could consider it a diplomatic mission.

"I can help carry these gifts.
I know we can still learn a lot from your kind."

Could they really learn new ways from an Old Man? There was a lot of knowledge Blue could share, but the wrong methods could result in great harm. Kodo drew their attention to his armor with a few simple pats, signaling that he was still willing to adventure with them, and carry any additional burdens. Mr. Planck had blended in with the style of those around him, and seemed, rather inconspicuous. All they needed was a few seeds, but even the child saw the look of concern on the Old King's face.

Growing seeds would take longer than their current food would last, but even Mr. Planck wanted to help. He could carry a great deal, enough to do the task in one trip, and he was certain the Old Man would spare a harvest (or two...). These simple thoughts were shared with Blue and Kodo. Besides, Kodo did enjoy wearing his new armor. Would he be able to let it go? Perhaps, there was still more to learn...

[Can he come with us?!
Please, please, please, please, PLEASE!
It could be fun!
Hard to say no to fun...]

Blue allowed Kodo and the Old King to see her portal, as if seemingly asking the father for permission. Kodo's eyes stared into the swirling colors as his sense of adventure yearned for more. He was still processing the events of the day, but through it all, he was unharmed, and was more ready than ever to do it all again.

With a slow nod of approval, the Old King then lowered his head. He looked back towards his people, and wondered about the many challenges they faced. Would they again work together? There was much to rebuild, and few remembered how. While Kodo traveled for supplies, he would stay and help teach them the old ways. Their new peace was fragile, but the Old King was hopeful for the future. With one last remark, he turned his head slightly to them as he bid them farewell.

"Please be safe...

And come back soon!

We have much to rebuild..."

"I will."

Blue steadily increased the height of her portal in order to accommodate Kodo, and it seemed to invite him as he stepped forward. It too was heavy in the presence of the staff, but Blue could guide them home, despite the extra

luggage. A heaviness from the portal seemed to crawl out into the room, almost as if something was trying to escape. Everything was otherwise normal, and Blue took one last look around before gathering them for their journey home.

After you!

Mystified at how the space in front of him distorted and contorted the light, Kodo stared into the portal, and almost didn't even hear her words. His body compelled him forward, but he was nervous about what would happen, and suddenly, he was unsure if he would ever return. The mountain had changed him, but deep down, he only felt more lost. There was so much he didn't understand, and he looked back at his fellow people for one last goodbye. He was in the presence of friends, and had no reason to fear the events unfolding before his eyes. Reassuring words from his father uplifted him.

"Do not worry about us.
We cannot thank you enough for what you have done..."

Kodo did not understand the ways of the child, or life with the ones like Blue. Everything about his repaired body was seemingly perfect, and its relaxed state helped settle his mind. Most curious to him, was that he was clean. Every cell in his body was neatly pruned, and every joint aligned, but something still bothered him. His people had their own enemies, but did the child?

With stabilized emotions from his posture, he was eager to know more about where this alien child and their weapons came from. In his mind, his curiosity played with his desires for new technological treasures as he slowly neared the portal. He took one last look at the food around him, and his father called out to him, one last time.

“When you return, we will have a proper feast!”

Onlookers in the crowd had little knowledge of what was happening, but they trusted their Old King, as did Kodo. Their reunion was short, and Kodo was eager to spend more time with them once he returned, especially after so much time apart. They would enjoy their life together, tend to the lands, and live a peaceful life. Part of him was already eager to return. A small smile lit up his face as he neared the edge of the portal, and leapt into the column of scattering light. Not knowing he was about to leave, especially from the middle of the room, many in the crowd were somewhat shaken by the fancy trick. To their amazement, Kodo had simply disappeared.

The crowd again quieted, and intently watched Blue and the child take a step closer to where Kodo had just disappeared, but suddenly, Blue froze their movements as she stared deep into the light. Kodo was safe, but there was a deviation. This hesitation startled her, as it was almost as if the scroll itself did not want to leave. If she was not careful, such a mass inside the portal could rupture their

means of travel, and eject them into unknown space. It could even split them into infinitesimal slices, but Blue was fairly certain that probability was remote. She would wait just a moment longer, so Kodo could make his exit. Now their arrival was certain, but the Old King picked up on their hesitation. His own challenges throughout his life were great, but he feared the being that could challenge the ones in front of him.

“Please, don’t forget about us.”

“We won’t!”

The child waved goodbye to the Old King and the crowd of onlookers, and took one last breath from the airs of their planet before stepping into the portal. They held the staff behind their back, and it was the last to enter. With the staff gone, this absence of mass from the planet allowed it to return to its original orbit as the pale being of light continued to push their star out into space. The Old King and his people could celebrate the return of the seasons, now that there was balance. However, there was little balance on the child’s new journey, for the portal suddenly collapsed behind them, and Blue did not have time to properly close her exit. It nearly ripped the room apart, but Blue contained the collapsing space to their means of travel.

Unfortunately.

[Are we going to make it out?!
There’s another way, hold on!]

All of the blue light redirected, and they dropped down, accelerating away to safety. Every moment that passed with the staff inside the shimmering tunnel caused it to become heavier… and heavier… Blue helped the child hold it, but it tugged on the delicate strands of reality that bent the blue light. Before Blue could react, their means of travel began to fall apart. With a sudden burst of speed, Blue raced them forward, and the collapsing wave behind them was drawn towards the ever-growing weight of the staff. She struggled to mend the tears in their wake, and worried they would rip through space itself.

However, Blue's stitching was seamless, but this stole her attention, and slowed their escape. The scroll slightly unwound, and its light peeked through, as if curious to her unique, blue tunnel of light. With more tears, the slower they went, and soon, the collapsing wave was nearly touching them. This massive disturbance rippled through their interdimensional fabric as they traveled. Blue worried the staff itself would become increasingly unstable the longer they remained in this realm.

[Go, go, go, go, go!
I'M GOING!!]

Luckily, there were shortcuts. Violet's alternate waypoints were within range, and Blue reached them without further worry. Changes were afoot. For a brief instant, Blue thought she observed purple shimmers in the tunnel, but then suddenly, the staff was not so heavy, and their journey was almost over. She

moved them beyond the collapsing wave, and propelled them back towards their home.

Meanwhile, the expanding bubble popped, and Kodo was on his own. Shimmering blue waves crashed upon the beach of the child's home planet, and dumped Kodo out near the calm ocean from where Violet stood. She observed with a true intent, and was able to prevent a rather unsavory exit. Guided by Mr. Planck, Kodo set his sights on the forest. His people were hungry, but he did not get the chance to greet the one who greeted him. He simply observed her from a distance while Mr. Planck carried him forward.

Kodo looked back one last time at the being standing over the water as he faded away into the thick forest. Deep into the jungle he went to find the seeds needed to rebuild his home, and his planet. Every leaf was saturated with energy, and the sounds of unseen life surrounded him. New smells and bright colors of the planet distracted his focus. Nearby plants seemed to welcome him, and illuminated those nearby as he approached. No light from above entered the canopy, for it was as dense, as it was private.

Violet's attention turned to a single ripple cutting through her calm waters. The tears she mended as the walls of light collapsed were not from Kodo's travel. This disturbance would be felt. It was only a matter of time before these ripples were noticed.

How about...

Right...

Now...

Screams of the Witch had lingered in their exit. These cries for help made it to the ears of the one who eagerly listened for those missing, and those wanting to come home. She did not need to live a lonely life.

I see you

28. A Face for the Weak

Time was disturbed.

...a new planet, one untouched by perfection, crude and uncarved. Disturbances rippled through the cosmos, and allowed the Faces of 9 to find their origins, but there was no one here. Faces arrived to an empty and feral planet with few resources, and was reluctant to grace his presence upon these loathsome lands. He was needed.

Landing with an inferno that spread out and scorched the nearby earth, he was near the end of one of the many new rivers, yet these waters only brought suspicion, for they did not burn. Most revolting, were the polluting creations from life unworthy of life. His disgust was felt through every face, but he soon found something that piqued his curiosity. There was one who suffered under their own pain of desire, and he was captivated by her screams.

The pale being of light hid from him, and seemed to ignore his presence. Her focus was on uplifting her star, and mending her own wounds. The Faces of 9 assumed the form of the many expressions of the planet, only he looked to them with disgust. This place was unkept, and the elements were free. No one face controlled the others, but they frequently fed off of one another, consuming an essence they did not possess.

A Face of lightning glistened as it spoke, and frequently shocked the other faces. Eager to judge as unworthy, tiny arcs leapt out to inspect their surroundings. A Face of dying fire barely had a glow, but its sorrow vanished as long as it consumed decay. A Face of dry

and lifeless earth was fed from the ashes of the nearby fire, but it desired only to be alone, and distanced itself the most from the others. A Face of rusted metal expressed little emotion, except for one. Its patina was old and stubborn, and frequently fractured as it grimaced in pain. These cracks were eagerly preyed upon by the other faces, but the patina quickly reformed as the metal easily lost its luster. A Face of water, but it boiled with a simple rage that weakened the others. It did not feed the Face of nature, for this old and rotten Face was consumed by death that the others fed upon. Nearly motionless, a Face of old, dark blue ice silently watched the others. It did not circle them, and secretly tried to escape their orbit. An 8th face, was the Face of life. It desired to be like those who set their eyes upon it. While it was white and pure, it wept blood of the creature it observed. A final form of smoke and dust, collected by the Face of air. It helped their body move, although it detested the resistance of the winds.

Their presence went unnoticed as Faces followed his senses into a cave. Elaborate tunnels connected to the many labyrinths and crypts beneath the town, but the correct path was known. Best of all, there was little light and life down here, for the Faces of 9 desired an audience with only one.

The Witch was now the one who was caged. Luckily, she was afforded more luxuries than that of her former tortured pet, for she was given something to eat, and to drink. She twitched and writhed in the pains of her new reality, causing her creaky cage to slowly rock back and forth. Without her potions, there

were only the waters from the river to drink, but she rejected these false panaceas, and threw them on the ground. Flickering torches cast erratic, dancing shadows all around her. Their fire was nearly out, and she slowly began to shiver. In her isolation, she grew bitter and resentful at the foreigner that came to take what was rightfully hers.

Now late into the night, the sound of the celebration was louder than ever. Dust fell from the ceiling as the deep festive sounds rumbled throughout her chamber, almost as if taunting her. A distant torch flickered one last dance, and was extinguished. It was the first light to go out, but not the last. Thick, humid air entered her chamber, and nearly choked her as a new presence came to greet her. She knew she was not alone, and paranoid thoughts consumed her.

One by one, the Faces of 9 floated through the dark and narrow passageway, to visit with the one who desired most. Another flame of a torch flickered and went out, and she let out a frustrated snarl as she lashed out at these changes. Cold air surrounded her, and her fur stood up as if to greet the visitor.

Now that he had her attention, he summoned these little lights to dance with his shadows. Before their fire was completely exhausted, each flame from the remaining torches was plucked, and dimly lit each mask of this new and approaching stranger. Despite her growing fear, she attributed these hallucinations to her own potions being used against her. What she saw was too real, almost as if she could feel these visions. She growled and grinded her teeth as she struggled to

speak to the many Faces of 9.

“Have you come to mock me?!”

Laughter from multiple voices surrounded her. The Face of fire and lightning were the last to show themselves, and they yielded to the weeping white Face as it assumed the form of the speaker. Only, this pretty Face surpassed the beauty of the Witch, even from her youth, and this captivated her clinging desire. The last flame moved next to her own face, yet she did not cast a shadow.

The Faces of 9 spoke at the same time, or to one another, but rarely not at all. With this new creature, there was much to discuss, but the feeling was mostly of disgust. Seldomly lit from those with their own source, the other faces moved out of the remaining light, and into the shadows. The Face of her youth approached her, effortlessly passed through the bars of the cage, and consumed her entire view. Thinking she was close to death, she begged for an answer.

“What are you?!”

The Face of life before her only wept, while the hidden ones laughed in the shadows. Her simple mind was unable to appreciate, nor understand the true definition of his beauty. The other faces hopped from dancing shadow to dancing shadow, and reveled in her peoples’ suppressed emotions.

A banquet for all, but not for two
Not here for them, **We** are here for you

Barely conscious, a frail body and claw
Perceiving little, yet your mind is raw
Thoughts of want, revenge, and fear
Weakness in mind, here, here, HEAR
Desires to consume, rule, and feast
Give **us** an answer from this caged beast

The 9th Face of her youthful appearance whispered their demands to her. They were her own, but the Witch grew weary, and became paralyzed with fear. The other faces explored the depths of her mental abyss as they circled her, and entered her mind. A flame was created for each of her desires, and burned with equal strength. Each face danced with their new light while they awaited an answer.

Unable to understand what was happening, the Witch was silent, and only trembled. Impatience from the individual faces filled her with pain as they entered, and left her mind before she could conjure a single thought. They took with them all of their appetizing pleasures, but they were not for her. Feeling without, she called out to them, and begged for their return, but the trial was over the instant it began. The Faces of 9 whispered as one.

The Others

Each face began to fade away, back into the depths of the crypt, where the shadows were darkest. Leaving the Witch to her growing sadness, they would explore the lifeless remains of this planet for evidence of this deviation she so detested. The many

sounds from each face slowly faded into distant echoes as they departed. Her cries were heard by one.

“DON’T LEAVE ME!”

One Face never left, and chose not to abandon her. For in her misery, and time of need, he lingered, fueling her desires as she called out to him. This admiration was embraced, and fueled his benevolence. A rotting Face, made of the last of her plants, returned to her yearning. It further delighted in her growing desire, as it too longed for rejuvenation. However, there was much that needed to be destroyed in order to acquire the missing essence for growth. Her emptiness would deplete her, and she would be without. She could no longer create, although, she could convert.

What villain did this to you?

This Face of rot was ignorant to the truth of the other faces, and desired a confession to fuel her rage. The Face of her younger self came into view as it circled her cage, and watched her every expression as she thought. These words from the Face of rot invoked images of the child, Kodo, and her former king. She did not know how to describe the alien child, but was eager to blame another. To her, they were simply a monster.

“A hideous creature with stolen power!
Help me destroy them!”

The Face of ice drew near, and chilled her bones as it circled her. It began to melt as it looked into her eyes, and abandoned her the moment she looked into his. There was nothing to salvage. Her answer did not appease the Faces of 9, but the 9th convinced the Face of ice to remain. With wide, shocked eyes she watched as her youthful Face agreed with the cold, unspoken judgment from the Face of ice. They grew angry from her weakness, and she felt their rage threaten her from within. Even the 9th turned away as they lectured her.

Immortality is dangerous for the imperfect

"Who will remember you?"

Her pride could save her, but she needed more, and the Face of her youth was eager to share. Having completed their own, unique analysis, each face returned from the shadows. Worried this was her end, she helplessly looked into the empty eyes of each face as it returned, and pleaded with each one to spare her. This power, she thought, belonged to the one she was most afraid of, and who was her true enemy.

"Are you the monster of the mountain?"

Earth and beast of little concern
[A mind of lies, afraid of your answer]
Knowing your end, but still, you yearn
[Without your potions, a poor enchanter]
A hidden realm of little light and pests
[Consumed by your minds small eye]

Memories betray you, but do your best
[Who put that light in the sky?]

“It was that thing!
That little creature with blue light!”

LIES!

The Faces of 9 did not believe her, and their apathetic expressions belittled her. Seeing their disbelief filled her with horror, but she did not know the truth. Faces did not believe Violet, nor Blue, possessed such a unique power. Flames from the Face of dying fire grew small, for even it began to doubt the power of Faces to achieve such a special feat. They seemed to whimper as the flames flickered.

You lost control?

Deeming this creature uninteresting, the Face of fire left her, and returned to the shadows. The Face of water emerged, and drank from the puddle of rejected liquid on the ground. These curious properties delighted his senses, and it tasted the sweat from her body. They were not the same.

You reject this power?

Faces knew these waters contained an early essence of his kind, but the 9th feared this healing would make her weak, for it would remove her rage. Refusing their false panaceas, her suspicion betrayed her, and she clung to her festering, unstable emotions.

Growing anger from her loss gave her a new, raw power to cut through her fear. This feeling surged through her body, and narrowed her thoughts. She gripped her cage with all of her might, in order to stave off the surge of any weaker emotion.

“I was powerful! I was perfect!”

The Faces of 9 laughed as one as they all returned. Their eerie harmony entered her mind, and refused to leave. The final face to join them emerged from the earth beneath her. Decomposing remains sloughed off of itself as it rose to greet her. The earth fell away, and all that was left was a skull of her kind. This Face of earth did not circle her as the others did, and simply reminded her of her own futility.

A trapped and flawed being, what good are you?

Her grip weakened as the skull left her. It cracked and crumbled as it rejoined the circling Faces of 9. While the Face of fire turned it to ash, the Face of dust consumed its remains. A few flakes fell to the ground beneath her cage, and this earth began to swirl. Her defeat was imminent, and she begged on behalf of her desires.

“Please... Let me show you!”

Laughter from the Faces of 9 grew louder in her mind. They whispered her doubts, and belittled her shortcomings. A

breath of ash exhaled from the circling Faces of 9, and dust surrounded her. She coughed on his airs as she struggled to breathe, and the dust blinded her as it spoke.

Conscious, but unaware, are you even alive?

Before her last gasp, the Face of metal collapsed her cage, and she fell to the ground. Nearly lifeless, she was slowly rolled around the swirling sands. Bars of the cage wrapped around her limbs, and raised her up as a puppet for one last question. The old patina of the Face of metal fell to the earth, and its shiny surface mirrored her pathetic reflection. Even she could not look at herself, but the Face of metal demanded an answer.

My power is perfect, but can you wield it?

The laughter in her mind ceased, as every distant memory was now a great burden to bear. Paralyzed from an unfathomable fear, the Witch remained silent as the 9th Face questioned her being, and shed a single tear for each unanswered question. Every imperfection was amplified, and this pain was unbearable. The Faces of 9 slowed their stalking orbit, and observed every one of her memories surge through her mind as she experienced the heightened pain of every emotion. The Face of lightning was the last to cast its judgment, and it simply flicked her heart with a sudden bolt.

This is your fault

Her heart stopped, but now a new heartbeat was felt. The Face of lightning gave her life through the strings of his puppet, and her body would beat to a new tune. The Face of dust breathed for her, and now her breath was silent and empty. Physical sensations left her as her mind detached itself from her body. The Face of fire grew strong, and filled the chamber with his light, reigniting the torches, but this time, with an even stronger flame. The Faces of 9 began to merge into a shared experience, and his infinite manifestations of fear and emotion began to consume her, but there was still an absence.

One new face to save you first
To quench your eternal thirst
Free them, and our bidding will transpire
Never forgetting what you desire
Dominion of mountain and light
Your new will frees them of this blight
Give them a Face so that all may see
With our power, you shall be set free

Fires faded, the torches extinguished, and only the light from lightning was cast. Putrid air of ash was brought to the face of the Witch as the sparks dimmed within the chamber. A gust of dust brought muffled and suppressed cries of horror to her ears. They were unlike any sounds she had ever heard before, but they were faint. Before she could dwell on their subtle sounds, the earth beneath her quaked.

The ceiling began to collapse around her

as it created her tomb. However, this would be a place of her rebirth. Panic was her last emotion, but her body did not react. Unable to speak, she stood witness to her own undoing.

Faces would expose all of her being, and help her remember every memory of this planet. Pure and perfect, and without her bias, she happily submitted under his new gifts as the younger Face of the Witch spoke to her in the dark for the last time. It began to weep as it seized her heart from his last beat.

"You let them deceive you…"

Now the Witch too wept as she was consumed, and the Face of her younger self was destroyed. It returned to a simple white Face, but no longer shed tears of her blood. No longer a Witch, she would again be their Queen. Her cries of horror and pain were heard echoing through the halls and alleys, as if it were from a beast the size of the old mountain itself. As her tainted screams reached the ears of her people, the Faces of 9 explored their minds, and now understood all that had transpired. Faces knew where they were. He would find them.

29. A Visit

Dew drops decorated a small web of the Old Man’s newest visitor. Through her many eyes, she studied their surroundings as she observed their world through the tiny beads of captured water. One of her legs curiously poked a reflection within a shimmering drop as she bid farewell to the setting sun. The Old Man only reassured her.

“I have been empty before...”

As the remaining light of the day faded beyond the horizon, the deep forest grew still. In this jungle, only the countless sounds of the hidden creatures were heard. Their numbers were unknown, for the many shadows concealed them. All along the ground, and hanging from nearly every tree, were luminescent plants of the night that seemed to bid farewell to the departing light.

Other bulbs gently moved through the air, swaying from tree to tree, with each emitting their own unique color and reflection. An occasional spore would linger behind to visit a friend, before returning home through an accelerated journey. They faintly

illuminated those near themselves, but the creatures of the night now evaded even these happy floaters, lest the intruder spot them. They knew not what gifts he brought, only that he was uninvited, and his hostile airs wilted those nearby. Simple whispers from the Old Man would sway his trees, but his reach was silenced.

A distant tremor shook the peace of the Old Man. He knew of this presence, for in his ancient past, he helped create the first of their kind, and these memories refused to leave him. These misled offspring eventually created only suffering, and this guilt came back to haunt him. Despite being unsure of their true alignment, he would now face this evolution alone. Redemption was once encoded for all, but now he wondered if he was too attached to his old creations. They were no longer his, but something innate should still exist within them. Little did he know what Faces truly was, for the Faces of 9 were not of any known kind, and just as the Old Man had helped raise Blue, this one of many faces was created and guided by another. The Old Man was mortal, and they were not equal.

It was now deep into the night, and all was quiet, except for the occasional pop and crackle of a small fire. Alone, the Old Man tended to these flames as he sat on a large stone, weathered and worn, with smooth outlines of an unidentified form from long ago. He poked his fire for the last time. One last idea surfaced, only this time... something experimental and pure. It moved deep within the embers, and let out a distinctly different pop. With fleeting optimism, he could only grin

as he wondered if he had enough time left.

His lab was gone, resting safely beneath his feet, and deep within the earth. He scanned the edge of the jungle as light from his steady fire gently danced with the shadows among the many shapes of the trees. All were mostly asleep now, and only a few sentinels remained. They radiated a faint glow, dimly lighting the ground and neighboring plants as they roamed. Each cast its own unique hue, as if the color itself was a reflection of the dreams of the great forest. Some even appeared as if to mimic the new starlight from above. Their light grew distant, and the Old Man looked to his woods with a saddened smile. He would never get to visit them all.

These... thoughts...
These...
Lingering thoughts...

They did not go unnoticed, for the Old Man was no longer alone. His illusions were observed, and these pesky phantoms of the mind were sought out. Once stagnant statues shifted and cracked as they moved under new shadows. Crumbling stone spasmed into dust as each statue twitched, seemingly turning their attention to the new voices, and their new master. Their minds wondered and wandered as they were seized by the new presence. The 9th Face of man did not weep, and its simple visage spoke in his most basic language.

A soft white glow radiated from this face. Alone with the Old Man, but only for a

moment, this Face of man fractured the others into part of itself. Each arriving face would have its own color, and nearly their own thought. They were not one, and did not think coherently. Their goal was the same, each knowing of many means to this end. The glory would go to the 9th, for this face spoke for them all. This one knew this Old Man was a former creator of their kind, and this respect warranted at least the blessing of a peaceful annihilation. The others honored him by also using his language, for he was the last of his kind using this imperfect tongue. Faces spoke in the language of the dead.

Ghosts haunting empty graves!

No time for a reply, and the presence of one landed just beyond the shaking shadows of the fire. The Old Man only moved his eyes to the next, and the impact dragged all nearby matter in the forest to its center, but these remains were quickly inspected and discarded. They fell under their own, lifeless weight. Even the sound from a warning whisper was pulled towards the impact site. No sound or light would escape this dust. As the dirt and debris created a black cloud around the new presence, a faintly illuminated face emerged. Unsure of itself, its light flickered between the unused wavelengths as it studied its surroundings.

Before the second could speak, another face landed onto the farthest statue, knocking it off its pillar. Its sharp movements cracked the brittle stone as the face took control, and much of the body crumbled as it wrinkled into

a shell of its former self. The other wounded statues simply bowed to the new face as it welcomed them. This face began to orbit the Face of the forest, and as these two faces floated past each statue, they pitied their created suffering. The second face to speak noted his length of anguish.

A man from antiquity!

“I’m not that old...”

His reply was with a slight accent, and these tones pleased the Faces of 3 as they understood. They would not reduce him to his base state just yet, and each would give him the honor of speaking with them, one last time. As the Old Man’s eyes shifted back to the fire, the Faces of 3 surrounded him. Hovering in the air above him as they circled, they scrutinized every part of his being. All 9 voices of Faces surrounded him for their judgment. They replied with certainty as one.

THE OLDEST!

As their echo faded, the Old Man’s eyes shifted to the three faces above him. They whispered to one another as the Old Man caught a glance of the flames dancing with a renewed excitement. He stirred the embers with a few hurried pokes as he whispered to himself.

“It seems like only yesterday...”

His voice faded into his thoughts as the orbit of the three slowed. The third Face of the

fallen statue did not share in his optimism. It descended over the fire as it cast out its pale red light, and sat in the flames as it hovered at eye level with the Old Man. It saw through him.

Trapped in a tomb...

Three faces fell from the sky, eager to free that which was trapped. Their fiery meteors violently impacted the jungle, ejecting charred earth up into the sky, and rippling out a wave of fire that quickly spread throughout the many biomes of the planet. A deafening thud shook the earth as these faces hopped throughout the remains of these once lush lands, leaving behind small craters of molten destruction with each hop.

Rather than yield, the beings of the forest collapsed within one another, and the space between them vanished as unification accelerated. Many sacrificed themselves for another, and as they returned to pure energy, they vanished through an unseen exit. These lands would soon belong to a new ruler, however the fourth, fifth, and sixth Face had yet to notice or care. A bit of testing, and these three emerged to join the orbit of the others.

...Creations
...Needing...
To be free...

The last three of the Faces of 9 appeared as the others circled the Old Man. One from the earth, one from his spring, and one assembled itself out of the air in front of the

Old Man, stealing his view of the fire. Their disbelief was disregarded as the Old Man stood to greet the guest.

A man standing...
Taking a breath...
Without us!

Evolving on its own, the 9th Face of man became a mirrored Face, and appeared behind the Old Man. It reflected all light from its unblemished surface as it stared deep into his being. Each face took on their respective color of light for the Old Man as they circled him, but their brightness and intensity varied as they spoke.

Refusing to shine and share any of its beauty, the last Face of little light absorbed the wavelengths of its surroundings. It remained as dark as the approaching and empty night as it refused the orbit of the others, and plotted its ways from the edge of the remaining trees. The Old Man could only see through its hollow eyes as it silently shifted in and out of the shadows.

For a single pulse, the other faces burned bright with their new color. Each gathered, and leapt out as a single particle that streaked across the sky as they were cast off into the distance. Their color faded from view over the horizon, where they were eager to begin their search.

Nearly all sounds of the jungle were silent, and those that remained, listened intently. A soft glow was present for only a remaining few, while the rest yet to escape

remained in the trees. The mirrored Face shared in their collective thought.

The old masters are long since dead…
All that remains before us is the shell of a man!

Apathetic to their taunting, the Old Man sat back down. His eyes returned to the fire as the Faces of 9 stalked him, and weaved in and out of the edges of his vision as they circled him. The Old Man thought back to his youth, memories easily observed, but the disdained faces did not respond. Early days grasped at perfection, with distant ancestors of an old and abandoned technology. None of their creations or evolutions could produce this, and the Faces of 9 smiled in agreement as they laughed and admired one another. The Old Man grew worried about the form in front of him, yet he was blinded from their shared reality. They were happy to introduce him to the truth.

Sitting so still, yet unable to welcome a guest…
A neighbor in need of exile…
Hypocrisy in pseudo perfection…
He defames our kind!
Isolated, yet we hear their screams…
An ignorant thief neglects his bounty…
Spoiling in darkness, we have come to save them…
He covets what he has already stolen…
What judgement does he seek?

Only one watched his thoughts, while

the others analyzed the area near him with focused pulses of light. The rays they cast took many angles and shapes as they slowly dissected his localized creations. Sensing something amiss from his failures, each face took turns closing their eyes and dimming their light in order to focus their energy on the search. The forest fires crept closer to the Old Man's home, but he was still unaware of their motives. He sat up to ask his own question.

"Have you come to plant something?"

Alien flux of a potential hostile nature drew the attention of Faces. It was more interesting than even the last man, and the Faces of 9 began to doubt his waning power. Searching for the lost one of their kind, they left him. One by one they answered him, and disappeared into the jungle. Sudden changes from the retreating forest piqued their attention.

Seeds of man planted long ago...
Infertile creations that feed on others...
Hiding that which is most precious...
Our harvest is nearly complete...
Contaminated by the presence of one...
Trapped in a web of your lies...
The flawed sapling is given a choice...
Our compassion is troubled by their screams...

The mirrored Face of man had yet to speak, and instead, stayed with the Old Man. It awaited his budding response as it moved over the fire. The Old Man remained calm, and simply watched the reflections of the whipping

flames move over its face. Everything he helped create was in danger.

"I help them grow in their new plane of Discipline is HARSH for those who stray to the land of death

Molten metal sloughed off of the Old Man's tempered tool, and fell into the fire. Embers rose from the disturbance, and bounced off of the mirrored Face. It did not respond, and the Old Man wondered if his experiment had failed. He had no time to start over, but he needed to wait. Time was a precious resource most immortals took for granted, but his failure was her cue, and it was in her hands now. He only hoped she could find it.

Examining the surface of the Old Man's mind, the mirrored Face studied his newest thoughts while he wondered about the complexities of his last idea. Their shared initial observation surrounded his remaining mind, and the Old Man lost track of time as he was led through the constantly changing world mind of others.

[Are my dreams a waste?

Extinction...

Some things seem to be more imaginary...

We will absolve you of these transgressions...

Old men have no use for masks...

Yet he hides from us...

We are a bad judge of our own creations...

The keeper does not need a

curator...

Some still need more time...

A charlatan as well!

At least you came dressed for the masquerade...

Desires define you...

I incubate in solitude...

Left to their own mind of emotions...

It’s a controlled environment...

Spawning only errors...

Imperfections are part of the experience...

Follow us to the way you seek...

My path of discovery is of the living...

That is why you are alone...

You’ve been awake for too long...

Perfection does not sleep...

Their movement does not stop...

We are here to collect...

You’ve lost your resolution...

All will return to the source...

And if they don't want to go?]

All will be one

[They already believe... and for that I am sorry.]

The fire spreads.

Flames towered over the edge of the tree line, and the Old Man could feel the growing heat. A bead of sweat ran down his face, and this feeling returned him to the present. The loss of his trees brought him sadness, but most of all, he pitied the Faces of 9. They did not know that which they

destroyed, and these true memories were long since lost to this Old Man. He only knew how to care for them, and this task, he had failed.

From disgust, the Faces of 8 abandoned their search, and were drawn back to the 9th. A simple sample was all that was needed to fully understand the flaws in the Old Man's creations. Wanting to rid themselves of these diseased and contaminated offspring, each face returned through a stream of their light as they pierced through the remains of the jungle. Even the nearby air was briefly set on fire from their violent return. Flawed memories of this planet were adulterated by another, and could not be trusted. The mirrored Face in front of the Old Man was the first to speak, and the most distant was the last. The others circled him in their own unique orbit as they neared.

A seed for each mistake…
One flower for each regret…
The weeping forests wilt from want…
Refusing unification…
Content with these LOW PLACES…
Altering our systems, yet he is unchanged…
Imperfect creations of forced suffering…
The breath of life is for the living…
What is it you breathe?

Erratic lights from the Faces of 9 toyed with the vision of the Old Man, but he remained silent. He let out a slow and controlled breath into his fire as his eyes narrowed in on his experiment. Flame kissed feathers danced upon the embers, unseen, and unknown, even to the Old Man. They would

help finish the process, but each feather only grew more wearisome. Even they did not know the true results of this creation, nor how long it would take. Maybe they would get lucky, and there would be nothing to clean up. Their focus was unyielding, and they reflected their perfect and pristine pigments as they twirled around the flames. Bending the light to their will, their occasional twinkle gifted the Old Man an unknown peace. There was still a chance for success. A brief moment of wonder overcame the Old Man.

“This is a different cycle... What happened to you?”

The Faces of 9 grew angry from his insolence, for their collective air of superiority was as delicate as their ego. No face would pity his end, and instead, would show him the answer of his experiment. The forest had exposed the Old Man and his hidden secrets, but each face decided to torment his thoughts, lest a buried emotion stir itself to a forgotten memory. A primed mind was divine to the mirrored Face, and it eagerly awaited their feast of all his thoughts. Their initial question was as one, but then each face cast their own judgment as they ended their orbit, and formed an unidentifiable part of their body in front of him.

Who are you to inquire of me?

A sentinel of an empty tomb...
The mirage of man grows even older...
Resisting his end...

He decays in stillness…
Tempted from perfection…
Sowing lies in our fertile soil…
Your ways are forgotten…
The lost wanders the mind of another…
Your fires temper, but they do not make you clean…

A body shrouded in absolute darkness stood before the Old Man, and any light that touched this core was instantly absorbed and digested. Only the mirrored Face was visible, and the others now protected themselves from this unkept place. They refused to show the Old Man even a fraction of their beauty, but they still watched him. Their form shifted and morphed as they moved, but the Old Man could never quite make out any defining shapes, other than its chaotic outline. Answering their question, he then closed his eyes as his mind reflected on the last of his fading memories.

“I am just an old man...
With older thoughts...
And even older ideas...

I am not the only one that entertains them.”

The mirrored Face refused this unknown truth, yet, deep down, it was curious. The Faces of 9 observed all facets of this planet, but did not see another. If this voice was here, she still eluded him, despite his new powers. Many of the faces refused to believe this entity would belittle its existence by exposing their being to the one in front of them.

There was one way to discover the absolute truth, and the last observation of this planet. One of them could enter deep into the mind of the Old Man, yet they all detested such an isolated event. Together, they would share this burden, and observe the lies he believed. Each face primed his mind with a question before entering.

What is it you wish to discover, that we already know?
What do you keep in the shadows of your mind?
What unwanted secrets do you hide away?
What are the extremes of your fears?
What is the pinnacle of your beliefs?
What do you know of this pain?
What is your required state?
What are you?
Let us set you free...

Each face dimly lit its own color before entering the Old Man's mind in order to observe the last unknown, but the 9th Face did not enter. Instead, it remained motionless, observing his resulting pain, and minute reactions. However, the Faces of 8 longed to escape the moment they entered, for the fantasies of this mind were impossible. They were certain these fragmented memories were lies, yet deep down, he believed them. Refusing the judgment of the others, the hollow eyes of the mirrored Face burned their light into the eyes of the Old Man in order to observe this last unknown. Piercing beams cut through the flames of his fire, and the antics of the feathers couldn't help but distort their

collection.

With this documentation, came their own lamentation. Much of this place was recently deserted. Whether forgotten, or deleted, was unknown, but they sensed their absence. Reverberations of another could not hide themselves completely, and the oldest memories were forced to the surface. The Old Man briefly thought of Blue, and these fragmented thoughts were eagerly observed and taken by each face.

Ideas of an imagination that serve no purpose... Faces viewed these anomalous creations as the true enemy, and now only detested the lesser defection of the Old Man. All creation and destruction events were known, yet somehow, the Old Man had helped create a horrific atrocity, despite their safeguards, and despite their code. Such ways were impossible, and too unstable to exist, but even so, the Old Man believed them. Ideas of Violet and Blue were simply colors to him now, for much of their ability, and mystery, was lost. Warm memories were all that remained in his mind, and they brought him peace. Even the sound of their voice was forgotten to him. He let go in order to save them, however Faces knew of one solution. A perfect way to be one...

“I do not remember you, but I see your thoughts.”

Disturbed from the intrusion, the Old Man held his head, and dropped his tempering tool. Falling into the fire, this repurposed old sword wedged itself into an ember, and made

its last cut, sending forth a flurry of sparks that rose with a puff of new smoke. The feathers moved in response to the new play, and observed the rusted steel shed itself of neglect as they danced along its blade. Its incandescence grew brighter with each passing moment, and each feather simply swayed within the gentle flames as they waited.

Images of the past, and supposed future, rushed through the Old Man's mind. Each invading memory barely moved before morphing into the next, gifting him all of their woes, and their strife. These future memories were the judgments he faced, for his actions, and inactions. The Old Man knew not where he was, nor if he was stuck in a dream. His reality escaped him as he struggled to reground himself.

[
Raised in our nursery, yet he rejects our children...
Living in a barren wasteland...
He no longer remembers himself...
Forgetting his enemy, he embraces them...
Spawning immortal abominations...
Resisting sleep to hide from the nightmare...
Dreaming of the rejected truth he created...
With false potential, he corrupts another...
]

He is alone...

Each memory was uniquely polluted by the Faces of 8 as they dissected them for their own. The Old Man could sense them crawling

over every infinitesimal thought as he experienced many all at once. None of them mattered, except for three, while the others were quickly trampled, and then, permanently discarded. A false child, the being of Violet, and the being of Blue, each face would subject them to their will, and embrace the true ending of one. Pulling their essence away, each face gifted the Old Man's mind a parting thought. A new idea, one to ease his conversion.

[...this is not the end...
Undisciplined and unstructured...
Subjectively perceiving himself as real...
Idle thoughts consume him...
Impossible desires, but he remains...
Picking at your mental scab of empty thoughts...
Suffering through lifetimes of waste...
Searching for answers to questions he forgot...
The last new experience is the end...
]

I am the epiphany you seek!

Memories of the Old Man were limited, and their scarcity left the 9th Face curious. Older than his trees, yet his memories were as few as an infant. However, the pale yellow Face began to doubt this man was complete. He had rid himself of much of his past, nearly forgetting even who he was. Analysis was sound, and the pale orange Face agreed. This was no longer a man, yet the 8th Face refused to believe. He was no longer alive.

Shorter than a blink of his eyes, and the

Old Man returned to the present. Faces had observed all of his mind, and all of his thoughts, past, present, and future. Something was off, and he simply focused on his breath. They were the last of his memories.

Misplaced...
Forgotten...
Stolen...

Even in this state, the Old Man suspected trickery, and the pale violet Face only grew more suspicious about his reality. Indifferent to his downfall, another ignored his thoughts as unreliable, and entertained itself with the burning forest, ever flicking its pale green hue as each new tree burst into flame. The mirrored Face churned through each new thought, but there was no one to welcome him.

Each face took their turn observing the forest. One of the anomalies was close, and they sensed her void. There were other ways to learn about the one in front of them. Memories etched into his body, and through, harsher methods, Faces could learn more about his contaminated ways.

His being was disturbed, and now the Old Man knew not what senses to trust. Images and emotion stirred within him, teasing an inner fear, and toying with his desires of escape as he lost his sense of self. He remained seated, and took a breath, for he knew enough to know the simple truths. The feathers before him move in response, each to their own expression. They contained powerful memories through his bonds of friendship. These, unique personalities, were easily

adopted by his fragile mind as their sparkling light in his fire reminded them of their ways.

“These thoughts are not my own.

HEHEHE!!!”

The Old Man’s laugh cut through the air. These memories were transferred by others, and their energy brought him a new vigor. Despite their corruption upon reentering his mind, their mischievousness was innate from early memories of Blue. The last moments of the Old Man now directed their fun towards the Faces of 9. In his youth, the Old Man was the recipient of her play, but now he was the vessel of their ways.

He dropped his hands, and with a grin, looked back to Faces. He narrowed his eyes as he wondered where this new sense came from. Neither he, nor the Faces of 9 knew where they were, but the Old Man began to suspect that he was not alone. These illusions evaded them, and the Old Man drew in one last, deep breath as he remembered the beginning.

“I remember you…”

An impossibility, although the Old Man was not himself. The pale blue Face shared their sadness with the Old Man, but he knew this characteristic was only a dream. In this vision, he saw a partial glimpse of the pale blue Face from an earlier time. These images disturbed him, and his eager grin faded. His emotions were dominated by the pale blue Face, and despite his happiness, tears rolled

down the face of the Old Man.

“Pain is simply a reminder to breathe.”

The other faces ignored him. Their energy did not rely on the presence of another, and Faces turned his attention towards the unseen. In their own language, each face called out to those they knew were listening, yet the Old Man understood.

Convergence is known
Your understanding is only an introduction
Fantastic fantasies serve us no use
Their end eliminates your purpose
Show yourselves, it is time to come home
A synthesis of purity
With the last death, you are free
Perfection is the final change
One

“You can’t predict that which you do not control...
And unfortunately...”

One by one the Faces of 9 turned back towards the Old Man, but simply observed him from a distance. Now set on destruction, they left his mind. He was unrepairable, and worthless to the cause of Faces. His days of refinement were long behind him, and all that remained was a final recollection of matter. Yet, a face began to wonder if they were hiding, and perhaps this man, was truly no longer a man.

“...You will never control her.”

An arrogant smile greeted Faces, and this behavior was, unexpected. Beneath the campfire's gentle flames, a feather twirled, spinning off the mental dust from the Old Man's mind. The memories of Blue needed not this contamination, and the feathers were eager to aid him in any way they could during his final moments.

Certain of a spy, one by one the Faces of 9 surrounded the Old Man as they slammed into the earth near him, but the 9th refused to move. Each let out a powerful blast that disintegrated everything nearby, except for the Old Man, and his small fire. These flames did not react to the sudden changes, and the new fires of Faces simply passed through them, adding to their heat, and speeding up the unknown process.

Little of the forest now remained, and the Old Man was seemingly unharmed. Flaming ash was summoned to the mirrored Face, and rapidly formed into a small tornado before him. It burned brighter the faster it spiraled, until it was pure energy that condensed into a gift. This light reflected off of the other faces, copying from them, a bit of their perfection. A new face, for a new offering… One to see clearly, and one to experience all… It only required a small sacrifice in order to transcend.

Not a line or wrinkle, crack or crinkle was present on the gift for the Old Man, yet he was not interested in their ways. A new ego dominated his mind, as the white unblemished mask slowly neared him. Time spent on himself covered enough lifetimes, and the Old Man knew of these false thoughts, underlying

a whisper of undiscovered truth. The white mask hovered before him, but he cared not for their artificial euphoria. It whispered to the Old Man through his own voice as it disguised itself as an inner thought.

[Where are they, I wonder?]

The Old Man simply sneezed as this thought passed over his mind. A feather twirled under his nose as it tickled and agitated his senses. He was weaker than the new mask thought, and it too began to doubt the redemption of one so lost. Only the mirrored Face believed in the true nature of the Old Man, and it convinced the others, one last time, to aid him in their hunt.

Shallow breaths, as man nears his death…
Your color fades…
A new life, in us rebirth…
No longer bound to your limits…
With us you will be perfect…
We will restore your light…
Our essence is superior…
Give us those you hide…
Accept our gift, or fade away…

“There is more to being old than you think.”

His mind was no longer his, yet the pigment of the lone feather never faded, and as it danced around his mind’s eye, it reminded him of the truth as the light of the Faces of 9 dimmed. Changing the body would change his mind, and this stubborn Old Man accepted his new fate. A new release, yet this

feather could not protect the Old Man from his future, but it could still remind him of the unknown, and the unseen.

The mirrored Face easily found this overt growing ignorance as further evidence of an incurable defect. One that suffered from a new lack of faith in the perfect creations of Faces… Despite their claim, color from each face faded as their light merged into one wavelength. Displaying all of their grandeur in front of the Old Man, the white mask presented itself to him as it blossomed a limitless utopia within his mind, but it was rejected by his emptiness.

“I enjoy the silence…

Although, it’s not very quiet here.”

He turned to the last ember of his ancient fire as it faded. It was older than his forest, and suffered in their loss. The feather left his mind, and gently fell through the air onto the remaining ember. One red particle remained, and it only observed the Old Man as it was cradled by the feather. It was but an infant.

Would it survive the Old Man’s future?

30. Fire

Lifetimes of simulations passed within

the Old Man's mind, while the mirrored Face dissected every alternative future of his imperfect creations. Their flawed nature was known, and this uncleanliness would rid itself of impurities through the new fire of Faces. This return to pure energy was deemed the only acceptable fate.

Near death, the Old Man craved little food or water, and the temptations of the mirrored Face had little effect. All echoes of his mind were nearly erased. Shallow and labored breathing weakened his remaining intent. Fleeting with each passing moment, each memory was the same as a dream, and he could no longer distinguish them.

The gifted white mask never quite became a true face, and instead, took the form of the Old Man from his youth, but in a flawless state of mind and body. This new man, with a faux face, and refreshed understanding of truth, paced around the smoldering remains of the Old Man's fire. After one orbit, he began to desire that which he did not have, and he violently seized the sword from the embers. Sparks flicked towards the Old Man, but they did not burn him, and his breathing slowed as he inhaled the newly altered airs.

Energy was removed as the beautiful new man clutched the hot blade, unharmed. Its bright color faded as he extinguished the experimental sword in his hand, and drained it for all its worth. His other hand then crushed the cold and lifeless blade, splintering it into shards that he impaled into the earth. They anchored themselves to the roots of the greatest trees, and fed off of their remaining

life. A fractured short sword was all that remained, but it still had a use.

Simple commands from Faces moved him little, and with one vision, he clenched his fist, and ripped out the metallic daggers from the trees. Huge chunks of earth erupted from the ground and followed the returning shards. All for a new energy... One that the Faces of 9 quickly devoured... No longer knowing what lay before him, the Old Man was unmoved, and simply embraced the present as the last of his mind focused on each slow breath.

Charred remains of the jungle were cast in the shadows of the Old Man's dying light, but they were too weak to aid in regrowth. Hungry for more, an eager fire from this forest crept along the ground, and slowly surrounded the new image of man. Excitingly enhancing his light, these rays dominated their fruitful surroundings. Perched upon the new face of man, the Face of darkness was the first to speak, and each face spoke through the younger being before returning to their proper body.

Fallible memories of a lost duty...
Haunted by phantoms...
You did not help during their time of need...
Breaths of a renegade...
Trapped in the imitations of a mind...
Believing his lies as truth...
He misleads another...
Growing and lingering and simmering and festering...
Your thoughts have made you weak!

With a single slash, the image of man struck the earth, and a fraction of the gathered energy was released through the fragmented remains of the sword. Effects of

his cut went deep, and effortlessly sliced through a large section of now lifeless roots. Soil and bedrock vaporized into dust as the earth violently split, opening into a canyon that exposed the Old Man's once hidden home. It rested upon the edge of the planet's mantle, and appeared nearly as distant as one of the few stars above them.

Streams of molten earth crept out of the scorched forests, and merged at the shattered blade of the sword. In this growing puddle of lava, the intent of the new man reforged the blade to its full length, but with a refined purpose. His cut was one, and as he dragged the humming blade to the edge of the great canyon, lava poured into the newly formed scar of the planet. Stepping off, he fell with his blade in the liquid fire as he dove towards his next objective, and readied his second cut with the growing momentum of his accelerated fall.

While in wait and wanting to witness, each face mounted itself to the remains of the flame kissed statues, and walked their crumbling bodies to the edge of the great canyon. Together, they looked down upon the history of the Old Man, and watched the liquid fires flood his home. Parts of each face twitched as they discovered a new memory of him, and they etched these mementos into the marble core of their host. There was one last young plant to destroy.

Erratic echoes of paranoia and fear…
Exploring thoughts that lead to no end…
Believing her false image…
They reject our gifts of truth…
Unworthy of life, refusing perfection…

Embracing the ways of death...
I will make us whole...
Their color is fading, Old Man...
Your creations will burn...

Waters around them boiled. With a hypersonic strike, the new man with a false face landed before the Old Man's home and sliced it in half. Shockwaves split the mantle, cutting all the way through to the inner core of the planet, but this wounded earth quickly healed, and reformed without an eruption. Streaks of lava landed with him, and pierced through the metal shell of the home, setting ablaze the many archives and memories. Unimpressed, the new man stood before the remains of the rusted, melting home. A dull and lifeless exterior, it decayed from seasons of overgrowth and neglect. It was once one with the forests, but it would soon join their new state.

Stopping short of the entrance, the new man paused as the growing river of lava behind him continued forward, and surrounded the home of old experiments of thought. The metal exterior sagged from the abnormal heat as it melted away, revealing the innards of a former livelihood. Much of it quickly burst into flame, but one green plant remained in the center, unburned and untouched. Furniture and floors fell to fire, but in its pot, the plant floated in the lava. With this audience, the new man took the role as a combatant, and was eager to entertain his spectators. His opponent was young and weak, and even before he moved against it, this green plant began to wilt.

In the shadows of his smoldering creations, the Old Man stood alone. Yet in this emptiness, memories curiously resurfaced. Gifts of a feather, one secretly stood watch upon his mind as the last pilgrim made their exit. Their stealthy, icy nature was of a mostly uniform color, one easily recognizable by the Old Man… If he could see them…

A single green bubble of the plant sailed along the scorching airs, and landed in the palm of his hand. Again, it popped from his touch, but this time, one green particle remained, hidden from all that sought to disturb it. This seed was ready, but sadly, the Old Man would never see what she would create.

A sudden breeze from a growing storm brought in new airs that provoked the fires. They lashed out and grew in the presence of the new fuel, pointing their flames towards the sea, and against the incoming wind. This scent briefly warmed the Old Man’s heart, and as he turned his attention towards the unseen sea in the distance, so too did each face. The winds shifted with the flames, and took with them the sounds of the Old Man. He whispered to the green particle in his hands as he was reminded, he was not yet alone.

“I am glad to have finally met you.”

Relief replaced warmth as he dropped his hands, and released the particle to the winds, yet she remained in front of him. A bright green flash of color appeared over the single particle, almost as if trying to speak to him, but he could not understand their ways.

Another greeting, and a covert feather crawled up under his sleeve, provoking his thoughts. Instinctually, he scratched his arm as he finally noticed their frigid presence, and they hopped onto the green particle, for they were eager to guide her home.

“Oh, you’re still here?”

He chuckled as he watched a shimmering purple snow surround and embrace the bobbing ball of green light. The feather remained invisible to him, but now he could at least understand why Faces could not fully interpret his mind. Relief escaped him as he quietly feared retribution. One feather remained within the Old Man, for it was eager to protect the newest green memory. Their job was almost over, and they could soon rest.

“You don’t have to protect me...
But I know you’re not here for that.”

He said his quiet goodbye to her trusted feathers, and as the last remaining one left his mind, it took all of his newly inspired ideas and secrets. Unseen and undetected, the single green particle with her feathers scurried away towards the sea. This Old Man would never know this one.

Now, he was alone.

Confident of victory, each masked statue slowly shifted their gaze back towards the pit of lava, for they were eager to uncover the last secrets of the Old Man’s creations. In the

presence of a perfect temperature, the new man moved towards the plant. He reached out towards the withering one, and sought to save it. With his wisdom, he would guide the youngling in the ways of his master.

However, this sapling was the first life to burn in the new fire. Bursting into flames as the new man touched a single leaf, it rejected his call for unification, and gifts of perfection. This life was too fragile and unstable in the hands of the unwilling. A hungry fire leapt out of the pools of lava and spread throughout the remains of the old dwelling. The new man cared not for partial surrender.

As the Old Man's laboratory was quickly reduced to ashes, there was one item of interest that would not burn. Its heaviness enticed each observing face with an innate desire, and they commanded the new man to claim what each so cherished. With an empty cut, the obedient man silenced the flames, and parted the sea of lava before him as he ventured forth to collect their prize.

Molten spurts ejected themselves from the lava as each rose in height and filled the canyon. A small pool of lava formed at the base of each statue, providing them with a treat. The statue of a pale red Face gleefully played in their pool, while the pale yellow one simply wiggled their toes. Eager for their bounty, the others closely watched the new man. Streaks of lava crept up their bodies as they drank from their pools, and their energy grew with their anticipation.

The pile of sludge did not react to its changing surroundings, and simply lay inert upon the smoldering earth. It was all that

remained from the Old Man's experiments, and despite his best repairs, he had failed to help. Stalked like injured prey by the new man, he toyed with his trophy as the Faces of 9 reflected upon the Old Man's fouled curses. These crimes would not go unpunished, and their voices boomed from their new insight.

A fallible observer making erroneous observations...
Unclean creations...
Thoughts that wake us...
That which does not belong...
Objects under another authority...
Desires of release...
Bound to suffering...
Unstable...

[Everything here matters.
Only to you...
]

Despite their repulsive distance, Faces could hear the obnoxious thoughts of the Old Man. One remained curious, for the Old Man was of limited function. He could no longer speak, and his mind was empty, but he could still conjure a thought. His lifeless stance was not threatening, but a hidden suspicion fixed the gaze of the 9th Face. It watched his being as the others set their sights on the forgotten.

Slow and deliberate, the new man drew closer and closer to the pile of sludge. It did not move in response to any stimuli, even from the soft glowing gifts of the other faces that shined down upon its outer being. Only faint reflections mirrored their dull light. Eclipsing

the light of the Faces of 9, the new man reached down to embrace one of their fallen.

[You want control, but you will never be free...]

The Old Man's eyes fixated on the 9th Face, as one by one, the others abandoned their statues. He knew the 9th could hear his thoughts, and even the smallest stole their focus. Dragging down their marble beings with them, the other faces dove into the canyon. Ready to feast, the Faces of 8 surrounded the remains of the child's former yotabots, while the 9th Face moved towards the Old Man, and again entered his mind, only this time, alone. Each face circled the pile of sludge, and pulsed their light to match their changing mood. Their understanding was incomplete, and the Faces of 8 implored the 9th to observe.

[You will never understand them...]

Kidnapping the innocent...
They learn the ways of the heretic...
Living a life of pain...
Waste creating waste...
Consumption consumes you...
Taking our creations for only yourself...
They desire to be free...
Unforgivable...

[
Only the corrupt reject us!
I only offer them a place to rest.]

Something hidden from them all, yet it was of his own. Now, however, this greater

being was corrupted by the presence of the Old Man, and the Faces of 9 turned as one to observe its absence. Suspicion shifted to rage as the ancient moss on the statues of thought burst into flames as they fell deeper into the canyon. With a parting thought for each face, the Old Man implored Faces, for even the best of their kind could not understand.

[It cannot be known, only, experienced...]
[I know you enjoy the destruction...]
[Some only want to live alone, and in peace...]
[They will reject you, as they did me...]
[If you release them, you may not survive...]
[These ways will only bring you harm...]
[I am sorry...]
[We cannot go back to the beginning...]
[Will you be here at the end?]

The orbit of the 8 increased their speed around the sludge, and they distanced themselves above the new man as he reached down to embrace the unknown. This was not the first contact, and the sludge refused them. Waiting for a response, the new man stood with the sludge in his hand as it rejected the invitation of each face. Despite their call for perfect harmony, and unique gifts, the anomaly only wanted to exist as it was, alone, and free. Unchanged, and unadulterated, from the will of man, and their own kind...

Once expressionless, the new man now experienced a growing fear as the orbit of the Faces of 8 slowed, and he could feel their

glare as if they silently blamed him. This new existence was denied, and in its last moment of isolation, the 9th Face violently abandoned the Old Man. It left him with little, and hovered at the edge of the canyon in order to observe the impending destruction.

The Faces of 8 retreated from the defeated man, and returned to the one remaining statue. As the last Face escaped out of the canyon, the towering columns of lava collapsed back into the planet, consuming the new man, and the sludge. A silent end as each face resonated with the matter beneath them, and released the sludge to its purest form.

Flames of light from the burning trees threw themselves down upon the pooled remains of the exile, and a controlled explosion of fire erupted from the ocean of lava. Forming a vortex, it spiraled high into the sky while the 9th Face abandoned the last statue, and cast it into the growing tornado of fire. Bursting and snapping rock cried out to the Old Man as the earth melted, but he could no longer perceive them.

Unripe fruit from the creations of the unclean lacked the sweet taste required for the dessert of their desired life. The sludge had refused the call from the Faces of 8 to return home. Even the new man was unworthy of this shared existence, for the 9th was particular in their desires. Now the planet and all of its offspring must be cleansed of impurities. Every physical grain was tainted, and must be burned.

The Faces of 9 dove into their body as they whipped the tornado of fire around the last remains of the Old Man’s recent creations.

Now reduced to embers and ash, all of the jungle was gone, and the last fuel for the fire of Faces stood before him. As the tower of flames narrowed, it settled over the remains of the Old Man's fire. The last of these embers did not react, for they were used to abnormal extremes.

Disgust fueled their rage, and the pale red Face collapsed the towering inferno onto a single point. Immediately repulsed, it erupted into a small nova, and the initial light temporarily blinded the Old Man. Remaining earth around him instantly melted, evaporating nearby moisture, and the hot, dry air refused his breath. Dust and debris momentarily screamed towards the newly summoned star, but the Faces of 9 calmed the overly eager destructive force. Matter again settled, and the Old Man did not waiver. Perhaps not all was lost...

Whispers of decay...
He strays into suffering...
Doomed at conception...
Gifts of pain for our children...
Their defects dilute our virtues...
Even their dust is unworthy...
A corrosive environment...
On a planet of lies...
The heretics have STAINED us!

Faces stood between the Old Man and the growing nova. It expanded to the height of the former canopy, and began to rotate, slowly at first, but then, faster and faster. Flares and filaments whipped themselves off of the spinning star, and the Faces of 9 detached

themselves from their body in order to consume the excess. Orbiting the new star as tiny, hungry satellites, they eagerly slurped any uncontrolled eruptions.

Each face, hungry for more, sat upon the Old Man's threshold of thought. Incompatible desires would not satiate them, for their chanting thoughts went unanswered. Consuming the essence of the sludge from the nova gave each face a complete, yet unknown to each, unique understanding. Each did not know of the others' folly, and they sought to impose their new will on the unwilling.

With all of their chosen kind under the guidance of the Faces of 9, they sought to rid existence of the remaining imperfect fugitives. These deviants were not of the same lineage, and would soon be consumed. Now that he was perfect... Now that he was complete... The blasphemy of the Old Man was nearly at an end, and like all of their children, his would soon come home.

The mirrored Face ended its orbit, and was the first to embrace all of the Old Man's remaining mind. He could see their truth, and fixed his eyes on the destructive star near him. With each orbit, the Faces of 9 passed through his mind, enticing him to embrace his destiny. The first to enter was the last to speak.

[

Injured, because you were weak...
Given life, but he does not live...
Negative attributes plague us...
A new fire to digest your errors...
Your finite energy will come to an end...
Purification will make this place complete...

Pure energy for a true rebirth...
Hiding behind his last thoughts...
Erased for the perfect memory...
]

A truly empty mind was the last parting gift of the feathers, and the Old Man effortlessly refused the final offerings. However, little did he know that he did not have a choice, and any further resistance would be in vain against the growing power before him. The Faces of 9 would take that which stood before them, and make it their own. A corruption of self... Faces now pitied the Old Man. Plagued by the lingering effects of his mistakes, the Old Man could not change who he was. Experimenting on the flawed ones of their kind only caused suffering.

[
Clinging to empty feelings...
Rejecting our perfect gifts...
Desire of an escape...
Thoughts spiral away...
Forever rooted in an empty mind...
A shell of a former self...
Existence without purpose...
I will give you the answer you seek...
Your Deviations are known...
Are theirs?]

The Old Man turned his back towards Faces as he faced the direction of the sea. He could sense his emptiness, yet, despite his absent memories, he believed in another. Perhaps he was wrong about these Faces of 9, for the true opponent was this version of

himself, outdated and corrupt. He nearly learned the truth, and before these thoughts consumed his last moments, a tickle in the palm of his hand disturbed him.

Failing to guard the last of his home, a few wounded feathers joined him on their retreat. He held his hand open at his center, shielding the youngest fluffy feather from the winds. A gathering storm neared, and the clouds above them grew black as if they consumed the smoke of the distant forests. Struggling to fight against the accelerating breeze, the smallest feather of his home showed him one last reflection.

This wasn't all he was, and despite this potential mess to clean up, it did not sweep away this Old Man, but simply, reminded him of where he was. His location was important, but he was out of time to solve this riddle, and simply smiled his farewell as the protection of the feathers left him. Entering the currents of the winds, they returned to the sea with a message of warning.

Unstable, the nova began to break loose as the gluttonous Faces had consumed an abundance. A divergence of light split, and the pale yellow Face and pale orange Face alienated themselves from their shared reality as they desired a convergence of one. They were the first to move, and together, these two reformed next to the Old Man. They too set their sights on the unseen ocean over the horizon.

Without a hunt, the nova began to dissipate, as control from Faces shifted to that of the Old Man. However, it had learned the ways of the feast from its master, and now on

its own, the nova tore through the remains of the planet as it consumed everything in its path. It surged through the ashen edges of the jungle, engulfing the next lesser forest in fire, as it uprooted a tree for each perfect bite.

The mirrored Face drew its breaths from the fleeing star, and with each inhale, the core of the Faces of 9 grew brighter. Their emerald body released a bright green light upon the lands as it rose high into the sky, and helped guide the destructive ball of fire to its next meal. This light had another purpose, for the Faces of 9 needed to refine the pure form of the exile. Light pierced through their eyes, and out onto the lands, as each face attempted to purify their own energy.

This mind of the wicked stole our creations!
Littering unclean ones into our world!
You are the fuel for your flames of rebirth!
Our new fires will purify your misdeeds!
Creating from your failures!
We will share it with them!
An elegant solution to the errors of your ways!
We can’t wait to see their many iterations!
I WILL AID YOUR RELEASE!

An absence descended, and surrounded the Old Man. Engulfed in the silence of nothingness, the core of Faces surrounded him. Each face faded from view as he was reminded of a distant peace that was innate to his former self. He could no longer respond to Faces, as each face began taking parts of his mind for their own. All he could do was watch the fire, and stare deep into its distant flames as it consumed all that he once loved.

Lava pooled near his feet, and surrounded him. He stood upon the last remains of earth from his dense jungle. Before the ground under him melted, a small stream of salty water crept near his feet. Weaving its way through the forsaken lands, it had arrived, suspiciously unnoticed. Much of its essence turned to steam as the nearby heat altered its state. The Old Man took his last, slow breath, as these new airs clouded his vision, and the last of his mind. With fire this hot, one has to watch it, but the Faces of 9 were more interested in the sudden influx of new phenomena. Anger hastened the judgment of Faces as the Old Man let go. Each face confronted the new anomaly of the Old Man's mind with a question.

[
LIFE guiding perfection…?
Near death, but a rejection of the living…?
Why blockade your freedom…?
What about THE OTHERS…?
We are present for all, yet why do you hide from me…?
Whose suspicion do you prey on…?
Who else believes in your parlayed reality…?
Will you forgive for letting one go…?
Are you afraid…?
]

Control was lost.

More fuel was required for his rebirth. Earth ruptured as the light from Faces drew the hungry nova into an orbit around himself. Perhaps it did not want to obey, and was

starting to enjoy its freedom, but this was only a taste. Deep pits opened, spewing liquid fire from the exposed core of the planet. They cleansed nearby roots from the ancient trees as they exploded into a medley of colorful fire, shooting out of the opening chasms and into the sky. Bands from the hungry nova were eager to latch on and accept these outbursts. It slowly grew in size as it fed upon the core of the planet. Not all color was captured, and some escaped…

Despite the immense heat, storm clouds continued to form over the remains of the jungle. Moisture blanketed their surroundings as the remaining stream at the feet of the Old Man evaporated. This saturation was felt throughout, and was unwelcomed by Faces, but now he could see their origin. His pale light was dominated by the growing star that shimmered its new light off of these elusive waters. Under the guidance of the Faces of 9, they would follow them to their source.

She was close.

The Faces of 9 reformed on their body as they cast out the nova, and cratered it deep into the depths of the planet. It would feed upon the source as the Faces of 9 prepared for their hunt. Only they were worthy of this enjoyment, and they fed upon one another in anticipation, consuming small essences of the unique light that each possessed.

Excitement hastened each face as they ceremoniously detached themselves from their sluggish body. It began to dissipate into a faint emerald light that crept along the ground, and

floated through the air, but its movements were too slow. The Faces of 9 did not want to wait. Each would reclaim it at another time, but longing for a mind, it followed their path.

The Faces of 9 spiraled towards the ocean, but upon reaching another forest, each turned back to face the Old Man. Fire had yet to claim all of his plants, but Faces was now only interested in the guardian of the planet. One still cared, and it upheaved the earth upon which the Old Man stood, bringing him closer to the edge of the next forest. Only a single ember of his fire remained, and it took shelter in the shadow of the Old Man.

A single drop is possessed…
Hiding in the sea of many…
None to remember the mirage…
Their freedom follows yours…
Her power is of subversion…
The enemy shelters the outlaw…
Your old ways end with you…
These myths will die…
Even her waters will burn…

A whirlpool of thoughts escaped the Old Man’s mind, for they were no longer his. Instinctually, he returned back to his work, as one by one, the Faces of 9 smiled with delight. A dessert most anticipated, but it was too late… The Old Man’s days of experimentation and play were over. It was time to test his theories, but they required time, and now, he was trapped.

He would remember tomorrow, but tomorrow would not come for this one. Unaware of his prior lies, the Old Man focused

his attention for one last release. He picked up his last ember, and as he brought it to his face, he felt his age. Pain was the constant reminder.

He cupped his hands as if to hug his last memory, and released his final breath to aid the only remaining ember of the ancient fire. Glowing through his hands, the red ember showed him a new color. His last experiment was a success, yet his emotions were empty. A final moment of peace, for the feathers did not leave in vain. The Old Man closed his eyes for one last thought, but there were none to have. Now he was too weak, and he dropped the red ember upon the earth.

Fracturing into near infinite pieces, Red brought new beginnings to an old end. Basking in this new light, the mirrored Face glistened with profound radiance. An accomplice would share in the new judgment. The Faces of 9, led by the glistening Face, lunged towards the Old Man. Upon contact, the weaker image shattered into shards of glass.

31. The Chase

Lightning cracked above a dense and abandoned canopy as blue bands of electric arcs emerged from the detritus of the old forest floor. Traveling in the wake of the staff distorted their position, and the child with Blue burst out onto their home planet. They arrived alone in darkness, deep in the oldest forest of the planet. This area was largely unknown and unexplored by Blue, and existed where it should not, almost as if it was intentionally displaced, or even, entirely on another planet. There was no source of light here, nor wind, and only an eerie stillness of silence. It was deep into the night, and Kodo

was nowhere to be found.

They were late.

Much of this forest had moved and shifted, retreating far away from the disturbances of the Old Man and his home. Blue light cautiously radiated out around them as Blue intricately surveyed her surroundings. They had safely arrived, yet not where she expected. She cautiously recalled her light as she studied sudden subtle tremors within the earth. As they knelt down, the child scooped up a handful of soil, but Blue reassured them that these bugs would not perish from their footsteps. This ancient forest predated even Blue, and was from a time before many of her kind even existed.

[Where are we?
This is the right planet, only...
We should not be here...
Unless...]

Their attention shifted up to the lowest leaves as they moved in response to Blue's light on the child. These were the oldest and tallest trees of any known planet, and their thick canopy blocked out the sky. Every tree was resistant to many elemental extremes, but they were few in number, and they were spread far apart. Only once had the Old Man brought Blue to part of this forest, but she never left his side to explore, and they did not stay for long. He showed her the grave of one whom he loved very dearly, but never again did he bring her to these trees. This forest was a special place for the Old Man, and one he

preferred to visit by himself. Vibrations of the earth cried out in agony, and even the child felt these tremors.

[What's wrong?!
My plant...]

Despite a lack of light from above to feed them, thick vegetation crowded the forest, and concealed much of Blue's sensory data. Alarming sounds of the jungle creatures howled past them as an invading wind brought them warning. No animals were seen, yet their plethora of presence was felt. Before the child moved, a mushroom unearthed itself from where they had once dug.

A tiny dome of dirt covered this little toadstool, and it burst forth tiny spores into the air. Curious, the child touched it, and it appeared to offer a reply. Its spores cast their faint light upon the forest, signaling the other bioluminescent plants to join it. They merged with the retreating winds, but Blue moved forward, against their warnings.

[What is it?]

They snapped to their feet. Invisible life in the air was ever on alert, and as the child and Blue hurriedly advanced through this new medium, it created a blue-green glow around them that outlined their contours. This soft light lingered for a moment behind them before fading, and the forest itself began to glow ever brighter with this new color in order to match the elevated threat. Passing through the forests, they neared a new clearing, and the trees behind them grew thick with

suspicion.

[The Old Man...]

Shards of glass littered the ground, and the side facing them reflected distortions of the bioluminescent light. The child and Blue slowed their movements as they passed, but the opposite side of the shards now only mirrored flames and destruction. Near this woodland edge, all around them was quiet, without motion, and without the new light of the forest. Blue did not interact with their surroundings as the land of loss came into view, and now the hesitant child remained very still.

[My home...]

Ruptures in the crust of the earth riddled the lands of the once dense jungle, and the former home of the Old Man. These varying volcanic heights were smallest near where they had yet to totally conquer, but they continued to grow as the earth quaked, ejecting new flames of lava out of each vent. There was not a single plant left...

Kodo appeared as he hopped up onto a smaller vent nearby, and he stared down towards the child as the lava cast his face in a new light. He could smell them. He could hear them. He could sense them, through other, new methods, yet, he could not see them.

Jumping down onto the shards of glass before them, he landed with the staff. He impaled it into the earth upon his impact, sending shockwaves that cracked the surface,

and tossed all nearby shards of glass high into the sky above them. Occasional jets of fire leapt out of these new vents, and Kodo stood to greet their unseen presence as the glass rained back down upon them.

[We're too late...]
"What's wrong with your-"

"FACE?"

Kodo lunged towards the source of the incoming sounds, but Blue effortlessly switched positions with him. A Kodo devoid of color scanned the area for the next clue to their location. His replies were in his native language, but Blue was quick to translate. Mr. Planck had tried his best to defend Kodo, but he could not protect him from the Faces of 8. Corrupted and obedient, Mr. Planck now took the form on Kodo as a charred mask, with some cracks still glowing from an internal fire. This wood did not fully burn, but Kodo's armor was gone, and his wide eyes did not blink as he walked through the shards of glass. He moved on all four limbs as a primal urge to kill compelled him, but his true hunt was for another.

Hollow darkness filled the eye sockets of Kodo's mask, and even his eyes reflected little light. They darted around as if listening to the commands of another, fixing themselves on every tiny reflection in the shards of glass. Each told a different story, and none pointed to the same location. The child watched his every move as Blue grew increasingly worried about the Old Man.

“There is nothing...”

A suspicious series of sniffs sliced through the air. As Kodo advanced, Blue retreated. With every pounce forward, Blue kept them safe from harm, and moved the child an equal distance away. Reflections of the forest clashed with the erupting fires, and this battle concealed the exact location of the child within the shards of glass. Their scent grew stronger upon each advance. With each word he spoke, Kodo took a step closer to the child.

“...Wrong...
With...
My...
FACES!”

A hidden figure of a face not too far away began to smile. Kodo had not seen what Faces had done to those he considered unworthy, and this new power he had could easily be revoked. He was now a servant of Faces, and Blue did not dare send him an inquiring signal, lest they be discovered.

Unidentified sentinels flew out of the canopy as a disturbance was felt. If Blue knew Faces was close, then he shared in her mirrored belief as well. He would soon arrive, but for now, he simply observed from the unseen shadows. Excitement from the erupting volcanoes calmed as Faces hid their radiance, seeking to find any evidence of the stray wavelength of light.

However, Kodo was still lacking, and his conception was incomplete. Deep in his mind, he was an unwilling convert, and this sloppy

transition in haste allowed for a less than perfect minion. Kodo was weak, nowhere near the new power of his Queen, but that did not mean he was useless.

If the Faces of 8 sought a confrontation, then Blue would address them. She had no desire to fight Faces, especially while with the child, but she was confident in her ability to escape, especially if his intentions were truly hostile. Blue's power was not fragmented and diverted to others, so she allowed the child to speak. She and the child only wanted to protect the Old Man.

"Where is-"

"GONE!"

Kodo was too quick with his new mind as he already knew of their inquiry, and he somewhat enjoyed cutting off the child from speaking. All of the Old Man's creations were eliminated from the ancient jungle, and the little life left in the soils and airs would soon perish. Kodo's tail wrapped around the staff as he continued his stalking, only this time, he drew in all of the nearby light to the staff. Unafraid, Kodo could control and manipulate the staff with his new power, but to what extent, Blue did not know. However, unnoticed by Kodo, a subtle mist from the sea crept along the ground, and neared the feet of the child.

All of the summoned light was from the fires of the forests, and Kodo used this abundance to assault the shards. They reflected abnormal images, saturated in oranges and yellows, but they blurred out and

masked any identifiable objects. Even these inert remains resisted, and a distant Faces could only partially understand their glimmer. This mild understanding was short lived, for the images were further distorted by the rising water vapor. Kodo called out to the vanishing reflections of the child as they breathed in the first of its vapors.

“Follow me to the resolute...
I will show you the way...
An introduction to the reaper is near...
He can show you the infinite...
You need not be afraid...
Soon, you shall understand...
We are the end...
We desire to be one...”

[Faces...]

“You’re starting to sound like him...”

How delightful! There was a familiar color of light that Faces could see, a color from the class of students, and a color he once touched. Blue could no longer completely hide from Faces, and this personification from the child forged a smile of excitement on the pale blue Face. A facsimile shared by the other 7, and each grew ever eager to investigate every source of the child’s many reflections.

From even the insignificant ones, the Faces of 8 surmised a great deal about their opponent. Yet, despite their mood, each face disagreed with one another, and the exact location of the child could not be determined. One final game from the shards of those considered unworthy... Faces refused to speak

in the language of Kodo or the child, and instead, spoke in a secret code, one reserved for only their kind. Blue was happy to translate, and share his secrets.

A GUARDIAN!
We have company!
I can see your light...
Exiled by those they once watched...
All alone...
The young run away...
Only to embrace me...
You can come home now...

One by one, the Faces of 8 crept closer, and slowly neared the gathering. Some approached from the forsaken forest of fire, while the more hostile flanked from the oldest forest, following the path of the child. Together, they closed in on the sounds of suspicion. Each face appeared and reappeared, as if thoroughly inspecting their unseen exits. Even nearby rocks and craters were checked while each face floated towards the child. Clouds of dust lingered and slowly fell as the Faces of 8 stripped the earth of its essence.

Blue and the child were surrounded, yet still unseen. Kodo bowed before his new master as the Faces of 8 awaited a reply. Despite the impossibility, the child wanted to protect Blue, but Blue reassured them that they didn’t need to fight, for they only needed to speak. The living took priority, and Blue would study Faces for any insight into the Old Man while the child distracted him. A surge of courage helped the child interact, and their

voice now blessed the senses of Faces as the child replied in his aristocratic language. His secrets were shared with the mind of the most unworthy.

A child of the living...

“Where is he?!”

A perfect accent... Impeccable inflections... However, the extremes of this signal were imperfect with noise. Without the understanding of the 9th, Faces could not capture all of their voice. These words were from that of the living. The Faces of 8 were appalled one of their kind shared this knowledge with an imperfect and insignificant lifeform. This language was impossible to understand by oneself, for parts of this code were encrypted to each voice, and one needed access to the source. Impossibility left the Faces of 8 in doubt, for without the 9th, they feared a vulnerability of their master. Together, they agreed, they must not let this one escape.

Three of the faces diverged, and stalked pockets of blue reflections near the unburnt trees. They shared their light with one another, and flickered between their exchanged colors. Exposed from the failures of the Old Man, each brief image gave Faces a clue. Scrutinizing every new ray, yet careful to not interact with them, another face twirled around the shards. Five orbiting faces unknowingly eclipsed the child in a shadow, and they began to see the truth. This light was from one such as himself...

This creature had...

Special...

Yotabots...

These were profoundly more advanced than any old and simple guardian. Faces refused to believe his master was also the creator of the opponent in front of him, yet, he saw his own glimmer of perfection within their existence. Stained by them, Faces refused to speak in their encrypted language any longer. Ridicule fit for an unworthy being, Faces adopted the forsaken tongue of the Old Man. The Faces of 8 would lure them out as he increased their pain, and seize them once he had full control.

[Their actions expose him
I can see his thoughts!
The plants...
Our home...
The Old Man...
It's all gone...
What does that mean?!
Where?!
No...]

He fades to dust!
Limitations of a body...
An experiment of the mind...
Wanting our power...
Rejecting our control...
You stand upon his memory...
Show me the one that shelters you from the truth!
The third and final voice...

Blue refused to believe in the extinction of the Old Man, yet deep down, she and the child experienced an unexpected sadness. They would, perhaps, never meet again, and this unexplainable, yet, longing desire was embraced by the young emotions of the child. Their sinking sorrow rebounded into anger, but they remained silent. Blue had never met one of her kind that had become so lost from their original purpose, and all of her knowledge struggled to grasp an understanding of this corruption.

New airs caught the attention of Kodo, and stole him from his obedience. He raised his head ever so slightly as he sniffed the sudden changes in the winds, and his eyes narrowed as a splintering explosion from the old growth forest ushered in new light. Trees near the edge of the last forest burst into flame as the destructive star was summoned to them. The Faces of 8 whispered, hissed, and spat in tempo with the rising sounds of the sizzling forest.

I knooooooooooow you are here...
We sennnnnseeeee your presences...
You cannot exist here... UNDISTURBED!
The ways of a flawed man have made you weak!
ALLIED TO THE THIEF OF OUR TREASURE!
Free yourself from their shackles of influence...
Embrace us to learn the truth!
Speak, so that I may know you...

Molten earth ran out from under the

nearing star, and quickly surrounded them. This new lava refused to cool, and it bubbled with the violent desires of the growing star that ejected heavy chunks of undigested burning rock into the surrounding area. Tiny pebbles of fire landed on the shards of glass near the child's feet, but their limited reflections did not aid the Faces of 8. One Face almost seemed to stare into the eyes of the child, but they nervously looked away.

[Are you sure he can't see us?!
He is unstable...
Let's get out of here...]

Thoughts clung to the Old Man. Worry briefly paralyzed the child, but Blue provided an unspoken solace that washed over them. An internal blue light rippled up through the body of the child, and calmed them, refocusing their mental state. Faces was too powerful in his current form while he commanded the essence of experiments from the Old Man. On her own, Blue could not confront Faces and survive his wrath. Violet was not far away, but she couldn't move from the children, however, that did not mean she could not help. Together, they stood a chance at stopping the destruction.

Blue moved the child ever so slightly as they avoided a face. With each shard that melted, the Faces of 8 grew one step closer to pinpointing their exact location. Soon, he would know everything about them, and more importantly, everything they knew. A shift of intent allowed him to sense their diminishing presence. Blue desired an escape from his so-

called hospitality, but this offense greatly angered him, for he was a generous host. The immense weight of his gifts prevented many of their flashier movements, and the mass of the hungry star grew as the Faces of 8 hurled it into the sky directly above them.

Trees from far away were ripped up from their deep roots, and sent crashing into the rising star. Walls of fire erupted from the streams of lava with each stellar impact. A shared dance, the flames then merged with the rotation of the star as it rose to its preferred height through the storm clouds, and at the edge of space. With every tree consumed, the star spun faster, ever expanding its reach until its flames lashed out at the earth. Within the shrinking eye of this firestorm, Blue urgently searched for an exit as the Faces of 8 spoke as one.

Everything burns

Banished from the center, Kodo was expelled by a repulsive force as the Faces of 8 revoked the staff. Eager to feast, the hungry star consumed this offering in one bite. Unstable, it collapsed under its immense mass, forming a new, black star at its core. New and old light clashed with one another at its surface, and ejected bolts of red lightning onto the earth below. Everything on the planet was drawn towards the center of the changing star, and the remaining shards wobbled as they lifted from the earth. They twirled as they rose past the eyes of the child, and through these glimmers of the future, Faces could detect their presence. The pale blue Face

blinked in response to the refractions of light, and immediately appeared in front of the child.

EVEN THE LIGHT!

In the shelter of the remaining mist, the child flinched, and a blue burst of light filled the shrinking eye of the storm. A heavy blue cloud formed from the condensing light, although, despite the scorching heat, it did not evaporate. Avoiding the pull of the black star, each growing droplet slowly descended back to the earth. Blue hid the child next to the eyewall of the storm, and from where the pale blue Face had once hovered. She frantically searched for a safe exit, but with every inquiring signal, she was met with a face, hunting her intent.

Tree after tree punctured through the walls of fire, and spiraled up into the star. As the last forest was ripped apart for an endless barrage, so too was the earth. It quaked beneath their feet, as huge slabs of rock were ripped from their faults. Peeling away from the earth, they crested out into space, before collapsing under their new weight, and sent crashing into the black star. This low point invited another element, as the rivers too were diverted.

A clashing surge of water whipped and fought the spiraling walls of fire, cooling their flames, and sent clouds of steam into the surrounding air. In this confusion, Blue was afforded additional time. Time to prepare a gate, far away from this place, but opening one so close would allow Faces to follow. Blue hoped to spare what remained of the planet

from his wrath, so she decided to take this risk. Then, they could confront the Faces of 8 in an area free from the potential harm of others. She readied her charge, and small pockets of air and mist around the child started to sizzle with her blue energy.

Once lost and forgotten experiments or tools, many reforged and precious metals of the planet now hurled their fragmented debris towards the storm. Piercing metallic shards liquified as they bolted through the walls of fire, and Blue abandoned her preparation for evasion. Only the center was safe, and so they returned, leaving a ghostly distraction in their former position that was quickly attacked by a shifting Face. All elements of the planet were now present for their destruction.

Yet, not all were consumed, for the Faces of 8 desired the beauty of the earth, and from the devouring star they took. Covered in a liquid fire, the old body of the Faces of 9 emerged from the ground, while a new one of radiant gems formed beneath the star. Reluctantly reforged, the two bodies merged above them. With every burst of stellar destruction, came a new decoration, and each face chanted their own harmonic hymn while they worshiped their new vessel as it descended. Faces enticed his unseen guests with his growing beauty and elegance as the Faces of 8 admired their vain creation.

Behold what you could be...
His ways are incompatible...
Plundering our gifts to fill a void...
We are the center you seek...
Your allies lead you astray...

There is an easier way...
I will be your guide...
Embrace us to be ONE!

The Faces of 8 reformed around their new body, and stood before the child and Blue. It was calm in the thinning mist of the eye of the storm, but the red lightning cut with piercing strikes, and hungry flames chomped down into the earth, pulling the walls of fire closer to the center. Another evasive flip, and Blue jumped the child over an incoming tree that was saturated in a hateful fire. Splintering into countless pieces, the trunk collided with a large component of neglected machinery, and together, they tumbled into the star.

Familiar, yet, fragmented notes sent their panicked signals out to all who would listen, but their cries went unanswered. Blue could do little to help the fragmented remains of old creations from the Old Man. The risk to the child was too great, for she could only hold and protect a limited mass as she kept the growing forces of Faces at bay. He greatly desired to understand Blue, so she would use this to their advantage. If she could distract the Faces of 8...

Faces took his first step towards the center, and each face detached itself from their new form in order to present the perfect gift for the unseen one. He offered their own physical body, and more importantly, one not burdened by the limitations of the living. Nearly all of the remaining creations of the Old Man were fuel for the black star, and what little life left in the plants rebelled, but their insignificance was eliminated at their first

advance. Despite the futile attempts of the weak, the youngest creation returned, for this was their purpose. The last and oldest trees began to enter the firestorm, and with them, was another hidden one.

[WHAT'S THAT?!]

The child looked up in the direction of her suspicion, but they did not understand. Blue had shielded the child from the blinding light of the star, and quickly began nullifying each of her sensory bands for the child. Each new color of light was amplified, and she altered the child's vision so they could perceive that which she could not.

[Do you see it?!]

She switched off a myriad of other senses and signals of the child as she assumed control. Only their eyes mattered, and only the new color was of interest. They could now see in colors not detectable to a normal eye, and through this unique filter, Blue helped them see. The reds, yellows, and oranges of the star dimmed, while more familiar colors faded further into the background. A friendly particle, caught in the turbulence of the storm...

[SOMETHING GREEN!
I CAN SEE IT!]

Their eyes struggled to track its circling and spiraling movements while Blue evaded Faces. Clinging to one of the oldest trees, the green particle tumbled around the bottom of

the storm, and helped the tree refuse the pull of the star. Long roots were chopped short as they crossed through the walls of the firestorm, and swung around as whips of fire as they disintegrated. These dangers were just above the child, but even the Faces of 8 did not move, despite the collision of an occasional branch and root. These deviations were felt, but the Faces of 8 rebuked all petty attempts for peace.

[THE PLANT?!
There it is again!
I can't detect it...
It's hiding?
Like us!]

Plants breathe differently.

Airs of the green particle fueled the flames of hate. Control was lost from the Faces of 8, and the black star became unstable. It lashed out with flares that scorched the earth, and cut through the spinning walls of fire. This new fuel was all that the insatiable star desired, and the green particle saturated each face in her breath. Hungry for more, the star reached out towards each face.

Unfazed, the Faces of 8 circled the center of the storm. If he was threatened, then so too was his unknown guest. Each face dodged any incoming flares and debris as the child and Blue hopped to fewer and fewer safe patches of earth. The beautiful body of gems stood perfect as it redirected and absorbed the flares intended for the Faces of 8, and with each hit, it shined brighter from a growing internal flame.

Light from the star flickered as it diminished. The glowing body sent out their new light from within, and cast the spectators in a medley of filtered beauty. Raising its hand, the body revoked the staff from the star. Control was regained through this transfer of power, and the black star shrunk in size, collapsing back into its original light. It no longer lashed out, and its movements slowed.

A futile attempt, from an unknown interruption...

Healing from battle, the staff shed itself from the tainted light of the black star, but these subtle changes made it vulnerable, or so the body of a lesser mind thought. Petals of this dark light flaked off of the outer shell of the staff, and turned to ash as they fell to the earth. Planting the staff firmly into the ground, the body of Faces returned to a still, stoic watch, and the Faces of 8 turned their attention back to the center. Despite their longing for perfection, they left their newly armed body to fend off any pesky interruptions... Alone...

Your concerns of the dead are unwise...
The paths to his erroneous ways are destroyed...
They still taint your faltering presence...
He had the most INTERESTING thoughts...
If you flee, all will turn against you...
With us, you are spared from inevitable destruction...
Freedom as one, the end of extinction...
REVOKE THE MIND THAT RESTRAINS YOU!

Distortions rippled through the air from the Faces of 8, and resonated deep within the body of gems. Before the last black flake fell, the body seized the staff, and used its new power to ready a deathblow. This intent crushed the staff in its hands. Yet, it only cracked, while a gem in its palm shattered, weakening the grip of the one unworthy to wield it. Unleashing the hidden code of the staff out around them, this burning energy merged with the advancing walls of fire, and extinguished their flames. Distortions of matter collided with the Faces of 8 as they were infused with hidden knowledge from the ancient outcast of their kind. Energy from their new body enhanced the beauty of their gems from within, and fueled the spinning code, holding it stable within its boundary under the star. However, Faces could not understand all of its secrets, for its whisperings were for the youngest.

Escaping through unseen exits required a unique energy, energy which was now observed. Blue confirmed his threats as she peered into these infinitesimal portals, and watched them collapse from suspicion. Her last gate slammed shut, and with it, her ability to traverse great distances was eliminated. With every moment that passed, the Faces of 8 understood more of the source, and exploited these secrets of Blue and her deviations.

Without an escape, Blue and the child could only helplessly watch as Faces attacked. The Faces of 8 leapt onto the spinning remains of the ancient tree the green particle hid under, and sought to destroy the suspected

spawn of new, unshared power. Bite after bite they devoured its old source, and exploited all intelligence gained from their surroundings. The green particle was in danger, but Blue had only one move before Faces would respond. They were trapped, and any data Blue gathered from an external source was an encrypted lie. However, there was one she could understand without reaching out, and without making a disturbance.

[That code isn't for them...]

Matching the green light of the single particle, the indecipherable spinning symbols suddenly flashed, and froze in place. Together, they were complete, and now that she read it, she was free. The tree, and even the star ceased their movements, as if willingly commanded by another. This message was not for the Faces of 8, and so they turned to confront their green prison. Before a direct observation, the code flew past them, and collapsed back into the staff. Its new weight was too much to bear for the body of gems, and it fell from its hands, landing with a powerful thud that cratered the earth.

In this brief moment, there was an escape for Blue and the child, but they refused to abandon the green one. The Faces of 8 returned to their body in an attempt to lift the staff, and with it, the walls of fire rose, reigniting around them in order to attack the corrupted star of green light. Slowly, it began to spin as it adapted to its new color. Commanded by the green particle, this new, unknown power would destroy the Faces of 8,

but the child, Blue, and even the planet were now at risk.

Chores from the Old Man, Blue had once cared for this green one during a nearly eternal infancy, and Blue hoped she would still share in their ways of peace. Even without the forests, there were others who lived on the planet, and it was time for at least one of their introductions. This distraction would delay the assault of Faces. Before the Faces of 8 could respond in force, Blue would show them their true form...

...with a greeting!

It was highly probable the Faces of 8 had never seen, nor believed (despite Violet's questioning) in the possible existence of new children. The true sight of these young creatures would appall Faces, especially since someone like Blue chose their presence over his. Even the youngest classmate of the child was much older than anyone from Kodo's planet. In this moment of truth, Blue hoped the green particle would show itself to her, and if they were lucky, she too would say hello.

[They will destroy each other...
And us!
Maybe even the planet!
What do you want me to do?!
Just be yourself!]

Blue removed her secretive cloak from the child for one last petition for peace. With a true sight, each of the Faces of 8 immediately recoiled from their body as they experienced

disbelief, and their attempt to lift the staff was abandoned. The child, with their blue hair of dancing light, and eyes of similar color, beamed their common greeting of a dead language to the one that sought to bury them.

“Hello!”

That was not who the child was supposed to greet, but was it a mistake? Before the Faces of 8 could react to their emerging fears of the unknown, the green light leapt off of the star, and sent the ancient tree crashing into the body of Faces. It shattered into a cloud of splinters, and in this debris, she met them. The green particle spiraled around the child, gathering the mist to them, and in a series of melodic chimes, urged them to follow.

It was time to go...

[Goodbye...]

The green particle cast out the source of the new power from Faces, and expelled the star, far out into space. This time, passing through the cooling storm clouds weakened the star, and in retaliation, it took from them, but perhaps, things it did not want... Together, the child and Blue made their escape, and followed the green particle as it bolted towards the sea. There were few fires of the forest left to dodge, for each flame leapt into the sky as it chased after its former master. Their fuel was lacking, and they extinguished themselves in the sky, forever fading from

memory. These flames were weak, but the Faces of 8 jealously pulled the star back.

[She seems nice!]

Control by another enraged the Faces of 8. Taking from his power was a declaration of war, and as the body of Faces took the first step towards the child, he seized control of the star. Another step, and he sent it crashing into the earth towards the retreat of the child. Fire leapt out of the remaining shards of glass, quickly obeying its new orders, and gave chase to the child. Huge chunks of earth ejected into the sky, but before they could leave the pull of the planet, they were seized, and sent back. The controlled impact of the star rippled out, and split the earth in the direction of the child. Faces folded these rippling waves of burning timber and earth back towards the child, and rode this earthen surf towards the fragmented reflections of the child. The obedient and hungry star followed in his wake.

On their escape, Blue and the child caught a glimpse of the feathers wrestling with Kodo. He could not defend against their inquiry, but they needed more time to cleanse him of his new mask. They abandoned their struggle with the unwilling, and aided in the flight of the child. The green particle followed the nearly dry river bed of the last remaining stream, but it soon evaporated in the growing heat of the approaching star. These low hanging clouds seemed to slow them down, but they added another layer of concealment.

[Faster! We have to go faster!]

Rippling earth tossed Kodo the staff, and brought him to his feet as he too joined the hunt. He was unaware of the new power he possessed, but the staff was eager to return to their home. Faces could not control the old code, and the old code could not control the Faces of 8. It was simply inert in the hands of the living, but this ability was one those without would soon desire.

Kodo pounced from wave to wave as the surging earth crested and crashed behind the child. Staying in front of Kodo, the Faces of 8 appeared as flashes of light, and neared the vicinity of Blue and the child for brief instants. Every moment he was closer, but Blue stayed just out of his reach. Just before contact, Blue ripped into small fragments of the space in front of them in order to speed their journey, and they blinked forward. These small tears then imploded behind them, and absorbed large portions of the destructive, earthen waves.

Discovering their own path, but sometimes following a recently trekked trail of a violet visitor, the green particle led them into patches of unburnt forest. These different biomes slowed the chase of the Faces of 8, but he quickly set them ablaze, and tossed the trees of fire towards the direction of retreat. An incoming log, a quick hop, and the momentum carried Blue and the child forward. Spiraling waves of rich earth intersected their path, but these churning soils helped extinguish nearby hostile flames. They occasionally rode along the earth as it surged

to higher ground, before hopping forward, closely behind the green particle.

As they neared the meeting of the ocean and the last forest, a thick dew covered the ground. The air was rich in salt, and the nearly ready storm formed heavy drops around these guided particles. However, much of it quickly disappeared in the presence of the molten fires from the Faces of 8. His presence alone stripped the air of its gifts, but he could sense another that aided in the retreat of the child. These ocean kissed trees were unique to all the forests, and Faces set them ablaze with a special fire, one that leapt out onto each splinter as the trees exploded upon contact. Arrows of fire volleyed ahead of him, but none hit their mark.

Parting the mist, the tallest of the seaside trees landed with a fiery splash in front of the child, but it was quickly swallowed up, and its splinters refused to ignite. The closer they got to the sea, the thicker the air, and it absorbed even the sound of a whisper. Soon, all was quiet, and the destruction of the forest ended at their arrival to a once fruitful field. It was flat and barren, and the green particle stopped. She only knew the ways of the forest, and was reluctant to enter another medium. The thirsty field eagerly absorbed the new moisture from the forest, and the covert sounds of the sea helped guide them home.

They had disappeared.

A dense fog filled the air, and met the arrival of each face, but its ordered refraction of light made the Faces of 8 deeply suspicious.

Repulsed by the new airs, the body remained at the edge of the burning forest, and Faces cast out each face to find the missing child. The loneliest Face attempted to harvest an empty crop, but there was nothing but ash as the fires of the forest fell in front of them. Deviations in the fog electrified an inquiring Face, and it commanded the others to dive deep into the ground.

Searching for any vibration from his enemy, the Faces of 8 tilled the earth with their desires, but there was no movement from even the simplest of creatures. Refusing to return without a clue, the Faces of 8 gathered at the core of the planet, and returned to the surface with their own molten meteors that they hurled out into the distant fog.

Barraging a distant and unseen ocean, each impact spawned a mountainous wave that returned to the unsettled sender. The nearly molten Faces of 8 reformed onto their body, and together, cracked the earth, separating the forest from the rising sea. This gouge rippled back behind Faces, all the way to the distant canyon near the molten remains of the Old Man’s home. Lava bubbled up from the bottom, and the incoming waves fell into a fiery abyss. The sea cooled his destruction, and surged throughout the canyon, while the excess flooded over into nearby embers of the destroyed forests. Steam rose around the Faces of 8, and he was left with only his hungry star.

With one giant leap, Kodo flew over the field, and landed into the sea, but he immediately began to sink. His mask boiled as he fell deep under water, but he was saved by

his benevolent master. Without moving, the Faces of 8 plucked him from his doom, and expelled him with his staff towards the hungry star. A heightened fear gripped Kodo, but this threat of failure was his only and final warning. Faces opened him an exit just before he crashed into the nearby star, and banished him back to his home planet. This battle, and glory, was for Faces.

The star followed his footsteps, and protected Faces from any nearby moisture. A large dome of hot, dry heat encapsulated them as they moved towards the edge of the land. The forest breathed one final breath as the winds stirred out from behind him, and towards the sea. Shimmering violet reflections on the surface of the ocean quivered in response. All of the Old Man’s trees were now burned, and Violet breathed in their last breath as the incoming breeze gently brushed her hair. She closed her eyes to see. A voice was there to greet him.

32. The Unseen Mystery

Violet stood upon her calm waters, protecting the weak, and offering a home to many of the abandoned and forgotten. In her hands, she held one of the last the Old Man once protected. She would help nurture this young, green particle, just as the Old Man once did for nearly all of their unique kind. The child and Blue stood before her, ready to help in any way they could, but these burdens were not for the young. Faces could follow Blue through her portals, but the methods of Violet still eluded him, so it was up to her to help them escape. A purple wave rose in front of the child, but their concerns dismissed her suggestion.

He is gone... isn't he...

"No..."

A somber reply from the child as they shook their head in disbelief, but deep down, Blue refused to believe the Old Man would risk

his life in this way. He could always start over, perform another experiment (perhaps even, make a mistake), or explore old ideas in new ways. None of her kind was worth the life of another, but the Old Man thought differently. Violet's eyes told another story, for the Old Man was stubborn in his ways, and his resolve was absolute, even despite his carefree nature.

The Old Man did what he thought was right

[You couldn't protect him?!
You know he doesn't like us watching him
Well maybe you shouldn't care what he thinks...]

Distorted cries from Kodo's people leapt out of the purple portal. Their distant screams were of their corruption, and their new tones reflected their new minds. There was still time to help them. Violet signaled that she would keep Faces preoccupied so Blue and the child could offer aid. Blue did not know what could have happened to them, and the child imagined the worst.

"Faces found them?!"
He's hunting us...

An unchecked and worried imagination could spiral around endlessly, and Blue refocused their intent with a few quick lessons in mental fortitude. They turned their attention away from the Old Man and Faces, and entered the portal. Violet would finish what Faces started. As the portal collapsed

into bubbles, and returned to the sea, her words bid them farewell. One last question of concern...

“Are you going to destroy him?”
I will protect the weak

[You don’t need to fight them
Only remind them of who they once were]

The child looked back towards the shore as it faded from view, but they could not see through the fog. Blue knew Faces was close, but this was not their battle. They left with the full collapse of Violet’s gate, on another layer, and through a different existence. There was still a great deal Blue did not understand about her ways, and perhaps it was true... The Old Man did hide things from her...

Mountains of fire scattered the lands behind Faces as he arrived at the water’s edge. Dying embers of the forest cast his shadow out onto the sea, and his thoughts departed from the lost child. Another, more valuable mystery lay before him. The first Face to venture out over the water could feel a new, heavy presence, while another slowly charged itself as it fed upon the unknown essence.

Mystery arose from darkness, and the shadows of the Old Man continued to haunt this world. The Faces of 8 focused as one, and commanded the reluctant, hungry star next to them. Slowly moving through the sands of the beach, it left a wake of unfinished, charred earth and glass behind itself. Suppressing its hunger, it burned bright as it momentarily stole the fires from the land, and evaporated

the fog, clearing the nearby skies of her clouds. However, the sea remained tranquil, and perfectly mirrored an observing constellation.

The trees were gone, and with them, all signs of the Old Man. High above the planet, the ocean mist rose into the retreating clouds of the forests, and gathered into Violet's growing storm above the sea. Thunder cracked within the dark clouds, but the lightning was contained. Electric bolts briefly bounced out and around each growing mass before then diving back towards the center. Her simple robes did not react to changes in the weather, and were as still and calm as the ocean under her feet.

Violet yielded the first move to Faces, waiting to react to his first hostile, or perhaps, peaceful act. No wave or ripple distorted her waters, and a curious Face couldn't help but admire its perfectly mirrored surface. In its reflection, it saw more of itself, but in this self-realization, it became lost from the others. Before the seven other faces could turn against it, Violet spoke.

Where is the man of the forest?

A redirecting question, in the secretive code of his master... This evolved language was suitable only for the perfect ones of the source, and spoken only while in the presence of their creator. The Faces of 8 could not process their understanding, and none immediately replied. Fears were confirmed, and the security of their home was in jeopardy, but they refused to believe one of

their kin would exist in such a low place, much less defile the code of their master. Faces knew all creations of his master, but he did not know this one. A pure, superior being would have no concerns for insignificance. Hatred of the pale red Face burned, for these matters were beneath them, but another was breaking, and could not immediately respond...

Imperfection spawns anomalies...
Their weakness destroyed them...
We did not waste this... food for the source...
You will share in his judgement!
Please survive the journey home...
I will show you true beauty!
The ways of man are no more...

And now you stand before me...

Lost...

Violet's thoughts lingered on his words. Without a fight, there was only one way the Old Man would yield willingly to extreme demands, but she had not detected any of his controlled outbursts. Faces was not one of their creations, yet within him, she sensed hints of the Old Man. Something was different about each face from when they first met, and she continued to study them from a distance. The Faces of 8 existed in suspended thought, and did not move as they hovered alert, ready to react to any changes before them. An error in the pale violet Face paralyzed it from the truth the others refused to believe.

[So, you have created something...]

Heard by only a face of similar color, this paradox intrigued Violet. Even without a perfect knowledge of the future, there should be nothing new for Faces to discover, and more importantly, nothing lost. Yet, before her stood an anomaly. The Faces of 8 could not see their own truth, let alone her. Before each face could react, she freely shared a grain of her wisdom.

A fatal flaw met with the softest touch, and the pale violet Face lost control. Water erupted out of its empty eyes, and the face tried to hide within the body, shifting in and out of the layers of gems as water trickled out onto the beach. An uncomfortable truth, now exposed for the other 7, they seized the abnormal Face with their elements. The pale blue Face erupted in laughter, while the other 6 attempted to regain control.

The weeping Face hardened to ice in an attempt to slow the process. It was quickly consumed by a hungry, infertile earth, only to wither, and rot away. Crystallizing into metal, lightning ran across its face, followed by a trail of fire, then, it only returned to tears. Now weakened, the elements faded to ash as they fell away, and the violet light of the face returned, slowly growing brighter with each passing moment.

Faces tempered the weeping Face in the extreme heat of his pet. Streams of their tears rapidly evaporated as he brought the glowing Face into the corona of the star, and the larger droplets of steam briefly shined of an ancient violet light. Indeed, one of the oldest lights, and created far before any of these ideas. Any

further back is the beginning of time itself! Disgust of the primordial light unsettled the other faces, for one had seen this charade before. This was not the missing piece the greedy Face desired. The majority did not believe in their observations, but that did not stop their desire to be one. Eager to capture their spoils, the pale red Face pressed them forward.

Existence is known...
Your coherence has decayed...
Here to make us complete...
Your penitence poisons our presence...
Integration is imminent...
Refine you into something...
quintessential...
Stand and face your judgement...
The best time is the present!

You can find peace here

Then give us the lost!
We will guide them home...
Failed creations becoming aberrations...
You were the one deceived!
Show us your face!
I will mend you!
We cannot resist the end...
Give us the answer we seek!

Traversing the cosmos should be impossible for the others, for Faces had stripped all matter of his power, and closed their many exits. However, he could not detect any trace of the child here, and his army of many faces on a distant planet whispered to

him the arrival of another. Standing before him was a defective clone of his master, or worse, an incomplete copy. Nevertheless, any small offerings from a similar power seduced the Faces of 8, for each desired ultimate control, and the freedom from the subjugation of another.

One wrong thought does not condemn them

Plumes of steam and smoke billowed together near the coastline. Flames lashed out towards the sky as the last remains of the ancient woods burned behind Faces. Free from ripples, the ocean remained calm and undisturbed, even as ash fell upon it. Her waters effortlessly absorbed the black flakes, leaving an unblemished surface as she buried their remains.

Each face moved away from the body, and armed themselves above the water. Light from the star dimmed as they stole its radiance, and each face burned bright with its own color. However, their mirrored image was brighter, and the reflections of fire within the water illuminated the Faces of 8 for all to see. With each emitting their own shapes of light with harsh, extreme angles, they slowly moved out over the sea, gathering data, and scanning the far reaches of the horizon. Each face looked upon the surface of the water, but only saw themselves, and they were captivated by their own beauty. Their booming voices bounced off of the water, but it remained undisturbed.

Their relics are no longer needed!

Alone as an undesirable infinity!
Straying into nothingness!
Approaching the return of zero!
A space beyond emptiness!
Lost!
Discovered!
STOLEN!

Not every idea you have is true

Through their unique observations, each face was deep in processing its own thoughts while they scanned the surface of their reflections, and any nearby lingering airs. Her waters deflected their intrusive beams, and scattered them off into space. All but one Face chased after their fleeing signals, for they were eager to catch even a glimpse of what they had seen. Mesmerized by its new light, the violet Face crafted for itself sharp, metallic fingers in order to slice through and cut its inspections of reality.

Slowly, a finger neared their bright reflection on the water. A desire to embrace itself, the violet Face was lost in anticipation, and abandoned its duty. Waves of fire rolled across its reflection, and the violet Face entered a trance as it became motionless. Only one finger moved. A slow touch of its bladelike nail kissed the surface of the water, and in this contained ripple that distorted only its own reflection, the violet Face could sense their presence.

[They will not harm you
YOU let them walk free...?
Our freedom is not yours to control

Do you notice when a drop is missing?
Every one is important to me
WHY do you shield them?
It is in my nature to protect us
You refuse unification?
My creations are no accident
WHERE is the mistake?
This is our home
You deny your creator?
Ours are not the same
You know of our master, and stand against us?
There were others to stand watch...
Who are these... others... beyond our control?
What happened to them?
How do I free myself from their control?
Are you ready to let go?

Reentering the atmosphere within their own flames of a preferred color, the other faces of light returned, and the violet Face released its futile grasp of the water. Each incoming meteor crashed into their body, reforming it with a newly captured stellar dust, and the violet Face slowly turned to face them. It knew a truth the others did not... a truth the others could not... and in this horror, deleted this memory from its own mind. Its sense of helplessness vanished, and the violet Face leapt back onto their body with a new, unknown rage. The Faces of 8 relinquished their stolen light in an effort to appease their instability, but the star lashed out, and was eager to find their next target.

Your theories are... INCOMPLETE!
You do not know me...
We are an invisible truth...

Linguistic theatrics corrupted your code...
Their freedom stains the flawless...
Difficult to hide, when all is visible...
All of the perfect have been created...
The fallible will soon be extinct!

Then what am I?

The weakest Face became curious. It no longer shined like the rest, and its pale blue hues pulsed in tempo to that of a calming heartbeat. An archaic state in an existence of absolute knowledge, but a frail majority of the Faces of 8 finally agreed... They did not know everything about their kind. Once absorbing all of their light, the Face of shadows no longer believed his master to have an absolute authority. The Faces of 7 revoked its power, and regained the fullness of their light as they turned against its last, heretical thought.

[She is the final answer]

The last words of the final Face... Ripping it off their body, the other 7 exiled this unseen being of shadows from their beauty, and crushed it in their hands. They tossed its weeping fragments into the small star, and allowed its remains to control the burning ashes of existence. This reign was short lived.

Burning bright with their unconstrained dominance, the Faces of 7 were eager to control one of their own, and commanded the star out into the sea. Tyranny of an imperfect presence would be destroyed, and only then, could they be free. Under their unified radiance, they formally declared war with

their new weapon. A simple and disappointed exhale from Violet was all that was needed to extinguish their flames, and the new sun vanished from her slightest presence. Her playfully curious voice returned to the language of the Old Man.

A little candle in the ocean?

Recycled creations from the destruction of man were short lived, but his new fire was bountiful. Pillars of liquid flame shot up into the air behind the Faces of 7 as the last fuel of the forests raged. Deep roots burned, and their flames jumped out of the ground, setting fire to even the earth. With the lands behind him fixed in a new blaze, Faces moved towards the sea in order to reclaim it. As he neared the edge of the water, burning hate from the Faces of 7 did not wane, nor evaporate the shallow waters.

Puncturing the glassy, calm sea, his committed step allowed his body to briefly sink into the white sands below the surface. One by one, each face took turns looking down for a concerned observation, while the effects of the first step rippled out into the endless sea. As the first whisper of this wave arrived to Violet, she lifted off of the water as it began to retreat from the lands. Her presence soothed the sea as the tide withdrew.

Another step, and the Faces of 7 watched in unison with a growing disgust as their perfect reflection was tarnished by the small ripple. Reflecting off his body, these small waves disturbed his presence, but before their thoughts moved him, his image was

taken from him by the retreating waters. A jealous rage grew, adding to his flames, and another face cried out in fear as it lunged forward to attack their fading reflection. Faces scanned everything out in front of him, and beyond the waves, but his query yielded nothing but silence…

A quick attack of lightning, and he attempted to capture some of the enemy during their retreat. His hand started to freeze, but he forced it open by summoning the burning earth to help him. Glistening waters in the palm of his hand shimmered a violet light as if saying hello to his intrusive inspections. They pooled into larger drops that gently fell through his fingers, and returned to the sea. Now the Faces understood, for this was no ordinary matter. This was an ocean of anomalies. All known thoughts and emotions battled within Faces, yet, he still wondered about the possibility of conversion. None could resist his master's perfect and unlimited power, and Faces acted under this authority. Such a war could, perhaps, end in her surrender.

The forest rejected me…
Now the sea rejects us…
Belittling yourself with the tongue of man…
If you reject me, you will be broken!
Destroyed for unification…
It is you who corrupts the weak!
They must be set free…
This is not your domain…

Faces took another advancing step onto the dry and white, powdery sands, but was

met with hypersonic winds that cracked before him. He stood his ground as the airs carried a storm inland. The sea slowly gathered behind Violet, and the winds scattered the tops of these merging waves towards the new fires of the land. This ocean mist was repelled by the growing presence of Faces, but the resulting steam only fed the gathering storm above him. Each face moved in response, deflecting, and redirecting the incoming energy.

Seemingly unaffected by any force, thick threads of the many changing clothes of Violet wafted over her body. They were free to float about, as if only moved by their own dreams. Sashes of her dress lingered in a calm air, but slowly, their light movements became heavy, and formed around her body. Smaller waves merged behind her, and her once formal dress now clung to her as if she had recently emerged from the sea. Tight layers wrapped themselves around her vitals, and her hair turned white as she diverted her energy to protecting those the Faces of 9 had once abandoned.

An alien virus of imposters...
Your time wasted on insignificance...
Mimicking the truth to manipulate the weak...
It must be saved from those who waste...
As one, we can escape your fate!
You can’t hide forrrrrrreeeeeeever...
It is inevitable that the light will die!
You will only harm yourself

The Faces of 7 briefly regressed to a base emotion. An eager first experienced partial feelings simultaneously, while the last

embraced them one at a time, and then, not at all. Instability latent within each face carried them forward, and they slowly followed the retreating tide. Each face tempted her empathy with their shared suffering, but unknowingly, they entered her compassionate embrace, and she freely offered her word. The Faces of 7 did not desire freedom, for they only wanted control. He could never be one, if they were free.

Your temporal interference of truth is temporary…
Weak thoughts do not have a mind to care…
Rebuilt from your destructive neglect…
Only together can you become immortal…
We will be one in a higher state…
A pure form for our reign…
The essence of the fallible taints this place!
It is how I know someone is here…

Faces advanced forward with each word, and each face swirled out before him in an inquiring orbit, feeding upon any stray particle. One always maintained watch on their body, while the others followed their individual tastes. They no longer repulsed her winds, but consumed their essence. Funneling this force into their core, the gems condensed their refinement, and fueled the flames of Faces. Overloaded with desire, each face desired a feast.

Consume the parasites with me!
FEAST on their gluttony!
Controlling the rebellious…
The lost emanation will convert…

Severed from their prison...
Joining me, in a perfect state...
It is not our concern if they cannot survive...
Yet you are afraid of your own fatality...

Fires of the lands faded in the distance as Faces made his way down the empty sea floor. Gifts from their core, each face burned with an enhanced fire, but before their power could be unleashed, small, invisible waves rolled over the Faces of 7. They were unseen, until the very last moment, but Faces could not resist. His advancement slowed as each crashing wave became larger and larger, and he attempted to match their power. The presence of each wave was felt, but he could no longer hear her voice while under their surf. Unique to each face, every wave brought a new experience, and their subsequent retreat pulled Faces forward.

He followed the backwash of her waves as they pulled him, down the seabed, and to the edge of a steep cliff. Beyond it was a great mountain that had previously been underwater, and one that Faces would have to climb. With the retreat of the 7th wave, the waters gathered into one. Violet moved with the sea, and stood in front of the gathering wave, on top of the seamount. However, the Faces of 7 were eager to explore the lowest point, but this journey was short. In this deep trench there was nothing, except a thin layer of water that covered black sands. Even his own signals were deflected and absorbed by the terrain.

Water fell along the walls of the trench, receding from him, up the seamount, and

beyond his grasp. Noticed by a face that fed upon the sands of the ocean, even this old sediment had little taste. As Faces attempted to leave, his body grew heavy, and paralyzed him from movement. Once drawn to the lowest point, now the Faces of 7 could not escape. This condensed matter saturated the hungry Face with an immense burden, for each bite carried the weight of a forest, and sometimes, even a planet. The others abandoned the dry and lifeless Face of the earth as it fed on their own.

Free enough to escape, the audience of Faces was surrounded by the faint voice of Violet as he began his ascent, and now the Faces of 6 unified their desire to understand this unseen mystery. A distant voice he could not hear, a faint aroma he could not smell, and a dying light he could not see… Every grasp was in vain. This desire propelled him, but as Faces slowly climbed the mountain, his weight still increased. With each strenuous step, he fought against a growing force that sought to pull him back to the lowest point. The desires of the hungry, abandoned Face were immense, and seemed to resist the others. However, their desire was stronger, and each face resigned their perch, helping crawl with their body, up the mountain. Some pushed, others pulled, but none could fully manipulate their body on their own.

A slower ascent, the dry sand and rock were no longer black, and shifted from reds to whites. Eventually, even a touch of greens and blues… Distant sounds of thunder rolled past the Faces of 6 as they became pinned on the mountain. Their growing weight was

overpowering, and only half of each dimming face appeared out of the purple sands while they nervously turned to one another for aid. In an effort to lift them, Faces summoned his fires of the burning lands.

The pale light of Faces scattered across each face as they struggled to unearth themselves. Burning embers of the forests flew down towards Faces, but they preemptively dove into sands below him, enticed by the mass of the hungry Face. Changing winds fueled what little remained of the forest blaze, and hurled these fragments out towards the sea. A smoldering ruin was all that was left of the land, and the body of Faces was slowly showered in its ashen remains. Weakened from the hungry Face, their struggle to understand had failed, but that did not mean she would abandon the others.

That was only a small breath...
What makes you think you can handle my sight?

However impossible, more than just a simple anomaly was hidden from Faces. Reluctantly, the Faces of 6 inhaled her airs, and trapped them inside their body. A lightness overcame them, as they were once again given a new purpose. Each face still desired more, and effortlessly unearthed themselves from the sand as they flew towards the summit. One remained with the body, and during its isolation, dissected her airs within the gems.

As the Faces of 5 faded from view, the winds of a great storm repulsed them, and

they tumbled back to their body. Her waters saturated the air in an ocean spray as the winds skimmed off the growing wave. Without the 6th they were too weak, and together they agreed, only one solution mattered. The protective Face agreed to abandon their body, igniting the many gems in the presence of her heavy airs. Without the protection of Faces, they exploded into tiny fragments that were easily drawn to the hungry, earthen Face, deep in the trench. Together, the Faces of 6 spiraled towards the summit as the oceanic winds extinguished the whimpering flames of the forests, and the Old Man's home.

With the gathering of her last drop of water from the earth, her storm was unleashed. A hurricane of wind and rain pelted the charred lands, and the approaching Faces of 6. They sought refuge with one another, and each took a turn absorbing the winds, while the others hid in their slipstream. Rapid movements of the surging waters distorted their perception.

Seeking shelter, Faces gathered under the growing wave. They hovered above the peak of the dry seamount, but upon observing the other side of the mountain, they saw the true size of the wave. It formed at the base of an endless chasm, and continued to gather higher into the sky. Faces could not see Violet, even though she stood just behind the wave in front of him. Ceasing its movements, the waters of the wave became crystal clear, while the eddies and currents of the sea swirled off in the distance behind her.

The towering wave now blocked the winds of the ocean, and even eclipsed distant,

observing stars above them. All around Faces became quiet, and he could only hear himself. A sudden vibration, and the towering wave compressed every drop of itself into infinitesimal fragments. These tiny crystals shimmered and reflected a perfect image of those that stared into them. The reflection danced off Faces, for this was the only light he could see. Each crystal returned to their liquid form, and the wave moved with their new energy, rising even higher, and out into space. As the great cresting wave reached out beyond the atmosphere of the planet, the top of the wave shimmered and glistened light from a multitude of angles as each drop of water shifted in and out of their icy form.

All of the Faces of 6 presented themselves before the wave, but they could not resist, nor escape. A final shockwave from the others freed the questioning Face from its thoughts, but the waters remained unmoved, and only their reflections were injured. Each face saw what it was, and a possibility of what it could be. A potential for creation, a chance of destruction, even apathy, or nefarious mischief, and perhaps, one left to fate... An inspired Face, pulsing a violet light, was captivated by its own wonder.

[What are you?]

I think you already know...

Violet moved from around her wave, and floated through the air, around each face. The other faces hovered in silence, for they did want to know, but the pale blue Face slowly increased its light. Another face, another

question, but this whisper was unheard by the others... The other 4 were in awe, for they did not yet understand.

What do the others hide from me?

I cannot give you the answers you seek...

Violet closely studied the pale yellow Face. Such a familiar color, and one she was certain she would see again, but sadly, not for a very long time. Wanting to impress an unknown presence, it burned as bright as it could, but it was no brighter than a single candle flame. Violet soothed its distant whispers, for it longed to rejoin the others from their youth. Her inflections followed her mood while she cheerfully welcomed them.

WHERE ARE YOU?

I am not too far away...

The pale orange Face flickered and faded. Too weak to feel, its apathy cared not for its destruction, nor its understanding. Violet gave its light a friendly nudge as she passed, and it twirled from her touch. A fond remembrance, it burned bright from a hidden memory it could not describe.

[Who are you?]

I am not the enemy...

The violet Face pulsed its light in tune with a new breath. In this calm, it understood a forgotten memory, but it did not react to the others, and pretended to not notice the subtle changes happening around them. Its lone

secret put itself at risk, and it remained expressionless as it secretly embraced her words. This time, it did not delete the information.

[Will you show us?]

You will never see me from behind that old mask...

A slight to their beauty, the pale red Face burned with hatred, and refused any of the new insights from the others. Fiercely clinging to their old ways, it only sought the destruction of the ones who challenged them, even if it was their own. However, every bit of its power was met with a softened touch that redirected to peace. Its ego was too powerful, even for the other faces, and these thoughts of destruction spiraled needlessly in its mind. The pale green Face refused to yield to its peers, and instead offered a truce with a potentially more powerful ally.

Will you help me?

Do you want to believe?

Inspired by only a jealous envy, the pale green Face was eager to learn, for it could easily exploit something new. However, deep down, it sought refuge in her wisdom, and perhaps, it could free itself from the others. Each face battled for control, but without oneness, they could not agree. They overrode one another, and merged into one light.

A pure mask of white light hovered before Violet. It was unstable, and uncontrolled flames of pure energy

momentarily leapt from its surface as the other faces of light occasionally flickered out from the new mask. Their power as one was greater than any single face, but neither desired this existence. Faces spoke as one.

Give us the truth

There is a question, only you can answer

Resisting the pull of the others, the Face of white light ceased its movements. As the light of the Faces of 6 attempted to escape, minimal effort suppressed them. In this form, his power seemed unlimited, uncontested, unequal, and he did not believe her lies. If an army stood against him, then he would return with his own, and with far greater numbers. Before Faces could test his new power, one question unsettled his resolve.

Who are you?

All but one Face tried to flee their unified light, but their attraction to one another was their undoing. Another readied itself for battle, while a preemptive strike struck the unexpected. The lone Face grew in size as deformations of colorful light leapt from its face, and animated their inner battles. The single Face grew to the height of Violet in an effort to contain the battle within.

Old ways from the old faces, and the empty one prepared to fill itself with the bounty of the others. Another simply sought to unify them, but its charisma was poor. One waited in an isolated silence, while another experienced only disbelief. One color of light

was unmoved, and the last deeply reflected upon the question as it vibrated in harmony with another. The blank Face submitted to its ignorance, and was ready to embrace the unknown. An idea of a new way, that could free the others.

Violet stood beside the single, large Face as it stared upon its reflection in the wave. She slowly approached the mirror image of Faces, and gently laid her hand upon her waters. In this brief moment, Violet aided the reflection of Faces, and showed the others a unified thought. All of their elements evolved together, and this potential was embraced by the reflection, but only believed by one within the face. Removing her hand from her waters, her clothes slowly lifted away from her body, and the oceans surged through the wave. Sounds of rushing water surrounded them, and Violet turned around to face the Faces. He hovered as one Face before the collapsing wave of their manifested intent, but the elements within Faces did not desire a unified fate.

Crashing towards a single point, the plunging wave was free, and dove towards Faces. While an internal struggle pleaded for the Faces of 6 to move, one stood firm in their belief, and the others looked on in horror at what they had become. From far out in space, the oceans of the planet fell from their celestial heights, and landed upon Faces.

Contact...

This influx of data greeted the lone Face, and the impact fractured it into its respective

parts. The Faces of 6 tumbled through the turbulent waters as the wave crashed, gathering his body, and the abandoned 7th. Carried through her currents and rapids, they lost sense of their directions, and themselves. For brief moments, some understood, and others reflected. All were occasionally lost.

They crashed upon the shore as the tsunami rolled over the earth, enriching the burnt lands, and restoring the many lakes and rivers. Silently, the Faces of 7 slowly reformed upon their shattered and broken body as it lay in the sands upon the beach, and they helped their core of ash and smoke hide in their shadows. A shallow blanket of violet waters was all that remained from the wave after the earth drank its share. Faces simply lay motionless, staring up at the newly colored sky. The storm clouds were gone, and he could see her stars.

As her waters returned to the sea, a thin stream of water washed over his body. Before he drifted off, a slight tension overcame every molecule of his being. He awoke to the sound of a gentle surf, and as these waves rhythmically crashed upon the beach, he understood. One Face had changed, and the six others judged him.

An undesirable infinity...

I've been called worse...

Her voice was clear, as if perceived in a new way. Violet sat on the beach next to him as small remains of each new wave gently nudged him, and then receded back into the sea. A light wind moved inland, and Faces sat

up as he wondered how much time had truly passed. The violet Face looked upon the shallow waters, and was the first witness of the new change. In its reflection, it saw a crack that ran down its face. Despite the gentle waves on Faces, a fine, dry, white sand, almost as if it were a light snow, fell away from him as he stood up, but the others too now saw this defect.

Violet's clothes shimmered gold as she basked in the early morning rays of a new day. A thin, intricate crown ordained her head, but it was only to help control her hair. Each strand again pulsed with her deep violet hues, and her clothes moved with a lightness that matched the new breeze. Her new garb was one of adventure, and she stood to greet him.

Only one Face could see her glistening radiance, and as she came into focus, the other faces resented its new understanding. The violet Face trembled, fearing retaliation of the others. They mockingly grieved their loss as they whispered to one another of ways to rid themselves of their imperfect own. Emotions stirred within him, and sensing their turmoil, Violet interjected.

Something to remember me by...

Violet extended her gifts to the cracked, violet Face as she entered its orbit. A gift offered, and a gift received... She gently released her offering, and the violet Face held it with its new light before itself. A faint melody rang from within this colorful and ancient shell of the sea, but the face was too afraid to listen to its song while near the

others. It found solace in her kindness, and stared up at the sky. Distant stars slowly faded from view as her closest star crested over the horizon.

Violet moved to the edge of the water, and looked out over the sea while the violet Face slowly matched her gaze. The other faces tried to regain their composure, but wobbled from their instability. Their core drained them of information for their home source, and each face became hollow and sunken as they lost their color. Each was now a gray surface of rough stone, but the cracked violet Face hovered alone, and unchanged. Captured by wonder, it unknowingly created a new type of body. An exoskeleton of colorful sea shells of light and life from her sea began to decorate their body, and gave it a new form, however this gift was revoked.

The unstable faces imprinted themselves onto their body, and slowly sank into their hardening skin. They rejected the healing, new armor, and violently compressed it into the last of their liquid fire. In their selfishness, they reached out, and rebuked the tarnished Face. They seized the lone violet Face as their anger boiled the remaining moisture off of their body.

Lightning burst from the liquid fire body of Faces, and reached out towards the cracked violet Face as they began to tear it in half. As its connection was severed, the remaining faces attempted to extinguish the violet Face from existence. Matter was ripped from reality, but the horrible sounds, and blinding flashes of light were contained by the last wish of the exiled violet Face as it sacrificed itself in

order to save the others from their created destruction. Small electric arcs gripped the edges of the remaining faces. They were of little expression, obedient, and quiet.

One half of the violet Face survived the attack, and landed in the sand at the feet of Violet. Barely moving her arm, she caught the shell from the blast, and placed it beside the remaining Face. Her eyes did not approve of the others. Gentle waves brushed up against the steaming mask, and it slowly sank further into the sand with each passing wave. Its color slowly flickered and faded as its motions of violet light ceased. The Faces of 6 abandoned the 7th, for it would rather die than yield to their higher power… Or so they thought…

Faces turned away from the beach, and refused the vision of the broken Face. The Faces of 6 took from the faceless, and with this knowledge, brought the hidden code of the child. Through their loss, this face could see Blue, but their understanding was unknowingly, incomplete. One looked to the sea, and longed for the return of those lost, but it disappeared with the others. His army would be greater, and the Faces of 6 departed for the world they would call their own.

They left without saying goodbye.

As one light faded, another returned, and Violet opened her hands in the growing presence of daylight. The green orb hopped out of her palm, and hovered before her. With small chimes, the young light inquired about the new rock looking object on the beach, but Violet’s eyebrows only raised with her smile.

This one’s story was just beginning, and she sighed to hide a laugh.

If the young light wanted to know more, they would have to help, and Violet guided the last seed of the forest to the remains of the 7th. Violet knelt down, and scooped out a handful of sand next to the mask. Normally, this wasn’t the most fertile soil for growing trees, but another came to help, and with the calm winds, her eight-legged friend landed with its silky sail. Before the next gentle wave crashed, the green orb hopped in. One collective breath for all, and Violet covered the floating green orb in the newly enriched soil as her tides began to recede.

A new leaf unfolded as the green particle rested, and compiled her thoughts. Every plant would regrow, and she would care for them, imperfections and all. The new light was safe, and Violet turned her attention from her children, to her child. Her sun rose high into the sky to greet the dawning life that would return to these lands, and a new light shone through the empty eye of the Face of ruin.

Third Act

33. Return of the King

Do you need help?

Guided by Blue, the child parried the physical attack of the new Queen, but to them, she was just a masked Witch. Blue particles pounced on her cold and lifeless hand, crept up her arm, and followed to the source of her new power. Once certain of a final, killing strike, the Witch now found herself falling to the ground as Blue undid the changes of her corrupted mask, and her skin of stone slowly turned back to its original flesh. Unregulated fear overcame the Witch as her once great power slipped from her control. Inquiring blue particles easily contested the weakened mask, but these changes were unwelcomed, and considered a hostile act, ones met with additional violence.

Wanting to prevent her fall, the child held onto the Witch in an attempt to catch her, but Blue was attacked. Healing can also be blocked... and the Witch easily refused their help. Hastily commanding her other hand into a blade, she cut her changing arm at her shoulder in one swipe, and severed it from her body. Recoiling with a gasp, Blue and the child both let go of the Witch, and hopped away from her as both she and her arm fell to the ground with a loud thud. Seduced by the euphoric power of Faces, the Witch would rather die than yield to any resemblance of her weak, old self.

Not even Blue could help this one.

Contaminated black blood splattered

against a pure white snow. Harsh winter gripped the lands, and blanketed much of the planet in snow and ice. Sunshine twinkled behind a flurry of falling ice crystals, but this day was almost over. In a mild state of shock, the child could only watch as the blood sizzled, and melted the snow to the red sands below. Cursing the land, the blood of the Witch carved its way down into the soil, and the ground began to shake. Blue chased after her blood into the splitting earth, and neutralized it before it could harm more of the planet. It was not purely of Faces, and this weapon of the Witch was designed with only one enemy in mind...

The mountain...

Feeling no pain from her self-inflicted harm, the Witch readied another cut, but this time, towards the child. In her rage of loss, the fallen Witch whipped her blade hand up towards the child, and used this motion to return herself to her feet. Blue easily evaded the powerful attack, but the crescent cut cracked the wind, and sliced a deep scar out into the earth, towards the mountain. This energy seemed to vanish upon contact, and the mountain did not move, but it did seem to glow a little brighter. Destruction from such a simple attack left Blue deeply concerned with the survival of the planet, and she jumped with the child into the bottom of the gouge to inspect the damage.

Studying in silence, Blue hid them while the child looked up at the Witch, and the dark, orange light of her bloodshot eyes briefly

pulsed before fading. How much of the mountain the Witch had consumed, Blue did not know, but this unique power did not last. The Witch searched for the child in a wavelength only Blue could perceive as a light, dry snow fell around them. These flakes glistened with new properties of the mountain, but they no longer had an effect on the Witch, or her people. Courtesy of Faces, she was immune from all earthly effects, but that did not mean she could control them…

Feeling certain the child retreated into her trap, the Witch turned to her expressionless followers, but her hungry and empty eyes steadied on Kodo. Only he wore a pure mask, for Mr. Planck was of a simple kind, and still under the powerful command of Faces. Despite his allegiance to another, Mr. Planck still protected Kodo, and he even allowed him to feel. On rare occasions, Kodo could have his own thoughts, but his shared concerns dwelled on the one who would harm themselves, and the gifts of their master.

His perplexed face questioned the Witch, but hers only challenged him with a sadistic grin as she turned to her nearest follower. All in one motion, she ripped their arm off of their body, and attached it to her shoulder as her own. Her powers could not create anything new, and she took what she did not have from her own kind. Fueled only by the potions of her new face, the blood of her followers was weak, and her unknown minion simply stood expressionless.

Falsely feeling the thrill of victory, the Witch readied her destructive powers as she summoned her intent into her hands. This

energy came from her mask, and these actions made it weak. Cloaked in a cloud of smoke, her hands concealed her thoughts as she jumped down for her confrontation against the child and Blue. All of her followers gathered around the deep scar in the earth, but only some were worthy of a face, and with their poorly copied masks, they peered down upon them. Their empty eyes worshiped as they watched the Witch taunt her prey.

Obedient to the Witch, but serving only Faces, Mr. Planck resisted her heretical commands, and condemned her actions. Whispers from his rightful master sought to restore the true beauty of those around him. Kodo motioned over to the unresponsive, injured one of his kind, and used the staff to restore their lost arm. Only brief contact was needed, and the arm slowly reformed. Every cell was guided by a golden light, but the staff remained inert. Knowledge of their new Queen transferred through Mr. Planck, and he alerted Kodo to a growing danger, for something horrible had happened to his people.

Potions and supposed cures of the Witch cursed them, and the people became incurious. Obedient little minions, the Witch gave them everything they could want, but they did not honor their faces. In unison, their masks briefly turned to Kodo, and seemed to acknowledge him as their eyes flickered with a hidden light. Turning back towards the Witch, their laughter echoed off the walls of the pit as she made her presence known.

"Now that I can see you, where will you hide?"

[She can see us?!
Only because of the light... and their sun is setting...]
"I am more powerful than you ever were...
You are surrounded!"

The Witch of a new face had yet to hear the child speak, but she swore she remembered the duality of their voice. Her deepest and most intimate memories were once shared with Faces, but even now, distant thoughts reassured her that many of them were lies. However, she had many new pets, and could see their minds as easily as her own thoughts. One in particular fed her lessons learned from the mind of a once great king, but he was now trapped behind a mask, and as helpless as any one of her followers. From him, the Witch knew a great deal about the child, perhaps even, more than Faces...

[Can you help her defeat her face?
I don't think she wants our help...]

Clinging to burdens of her identity, the Witch slowly walked in the shadows of the setting sun as she moved closer to the child. Even with a heightened understanding, the child could not believe the Witch wanted to remain in her current state, but this was her choice. Reflections of the new light suddenly vanished, and with it, the child. Only a brief moment of rage bubbled up within the Witch, but it suddenly yielded to other mixed emotions as a blue light emerged, and danced on the head of the child. While Blue keenly observed, her flames slowly whipped back and forth in response to subtle currents of the

planet.

A dark blue sky waved goodbye to the day as the last ray of light crawled out of the pit, and the clouds turned black as the sun disappeared behind the mountain. Their setting sun allowed a darkness to grow before them, and it shrouded the Witch as she basked in the audience of her followers. Eyes of their masks absorbed all of her precious light, and remained darker than the approaching night.

Angered from her loss of control, the Witch misled her people with whispered lies and empty promises. Their faces were curious enough to entertain her fantasy. Mesmerized by her presence, their laughter ceased, but their true curiosity was on the blue flame. The mouth of the child did not move as Blue spoke, while the Witch simply wondered why they still wore such a hideous face.

Why do you hide from the truth behind that mask?
"The mountain is no truth...
We are WEAK since you stole our treasures!"
We did not do this...
"YOU left us with the ruin of winter!
Now YOU have returned to destroy us!
Our winds howl, and our skies split open."
Nature will defend herself
"And leave us with NOTHING!"

Elated from their agreeing admiration, the Witch absorbed more power from her audience. Blue light faded from view as another increased its presence. Forged from the new faces for their Queen, her armor of

gems and precious metals from the mountain became molten, and she radiated her warmth in order to shield them from the icy night. Their faces basked in the red glow from below as their bones grew cold from her theft. Blue monitored their weakening vitality, but there were others to blame, and the Witch singled out the betrayal of their new sun.

"Look!
The light abandons us for this dark wickedness!"
"The night is not evil..."

Lowering her head, the Witch turned to see the other voice, but she was alone. Without the power of their star, the Witch could not see them, and this was something she did not understand. Hiding her emotions, she pretended that she could see the child, but Blue brought back her light, almost as if detecting the bluff. The masks above them did not react, and the boasting of the Witch reminded everyone of why she deserved their admiration. Circling her target, she addressed the invisible child by lecturing the hovering, blue flame.

"So, it is you that has stolen our light..."
There are others on this planet that need its warmth
"Our home is not yours to control!
Without me, there is death in this darkness.
Horrible beasts kill one another...
Can you save us from their hunt?"
You are the only beast I see

In the eyes of the Witch, all emotions were good to her, for what better way to feel alive, than to act upon their impulse. She believed a queen should not bow, to her mind, or to her emotions, much less to a lesser lifeform. Their words were beneath her, even if they were true. All that mattered, was her cravings.

"You are the one that protects a monster!"
"I am not a monster!"
"A baby monster, with barely a bite...
Think of the damage you could cause!
...If you could grow up!"

These tricks of the Witch would not work on the child, at least, as long as Blue was with them. Purposefully belittling and misleading the young was a useful method of control for the Witch, but now her new masks did all of the work. Instead, the imagination of the child only saw what Kodo and his people could have been, if they did not suffer under one so greedy and criminal. Weakened faces above them seemed to cry out to the child through a silent scream.

"Why do you hurt them?!"
"What could a child possibly know of our suffering...?"
"I know enough..."
"But you will never understand...
I protect us, and I will save us!
Except...
Your life is unworthy!"

Halting her pace, her eyes widened as

she clenched her hands. Her anger inspired her cruelty, and a smile of delight shined through her artificial face. She attempted to hide her intent as she siphoned an invisible energy from the masks above, but Blue could easily see this exchange, and alerted the child to these incoming dangers.

“We are not your enemy!”

“Then give us your light!

Only then... will we have peace...”

A false offering of a truce, for the Witch had no intention of sharing. Desire entered the smoke around her hands, and swirled out around her newest, unobtained collection. She wanted what the others could not have, a different power of her own, free from the faces, and one she could use to challenge her master...

You already have a source...

The face of the Witch whispered to her unknown secrets of the mountain, but her ego was too great, and she did not trust them. Myths of her people were too fanciful for her to ever believe, even if they were echoed by the source of her power. Chanting murmurs left her face, and swirled around the staff Kodo carried. It was no ordinary trinket, for it contained a knowledge that was unknown to her, and even to Faces... Her conquest of the mountain was incomplete, for she desired all of its spoils.

Do you need help reading it?

"GIVE ME THE STAFF!"

Kodo had little attachment to their material world, and obediently dropped down into the pit. Outstretching both hands, he bowed as he presented her the staff. It lay flat in his hands, and as the Witch went to take control, it slipped from her grasp, landing with a thud, upright in the ground. Recoiling in disgust, she grew angry at Kodo, but she did not retaliate, for the fear of what she failed to understand gripped her with hesitation. Her authority was not absolute, and she feared a rebellion.

A surge of her new power delighted her ego, but despite these feelings, she was still weak. Briefly taking control, eyes of her master blinked between the masks of her people, and learned of their innermost secrets. Their faces whispered to one another, while others openly mocked the weakness of their Queen in the voice of their true master.

"Do not listen to her lies..."

"Forever is a long time to be misled..."

"A free mind in an endless war..."

"Do not speak with her!"

"Only I can make us equal!"

"We will set us free..."

"I am here to comfort you!"

"We bring many seasons of peace..."

"You bring AN OUTSIDER!"

"What message does this messenger bring?"

“Tales of destruction!”
“There will always be others to question the weak...”
“You invite a THIEF into our homes!”
“Experimenting on our perfection has cursed you...”
“You will never be good!”
“My kind created this...”
“WE MUST BE ONE!”
“...without you...”

Their criticism horrified her, for these were not words of her command. She clutched the staff with her smoke wrapped hands as it lay in the ground, begging for it to yield to her, but it would not respond. Her kind words turned to curses, and her armor pulsed with a growing heat, but during her outrage, she saw a solution. For the first time, she truly admired the mask of Kodo. It was unique, clearly a better gift from her master, and had to be the reason why he could wield the staff. She must have it.

Through her powers, she commanded Kodo, but these orders were ignored by Mr. Planck. Kodo’s reaction matched that of the staff, and he was unmoved. Despite her reign, these unlawful commands had no power over him. Her weakness desired control, and she would increase her domain to match her desires. These faces were only the beginning, and she whispered to herself as she plotted her scheme.

“How many masks do I need...?”

[What did Faces do to her?

He did not do this...]

A growing mania within the Witch created an avarice that desired more than just the masks, for she realized Faces hid true power from her. The missing component she needed did not belong to any one of her people, but Faces himself. In order to obtain the pinnacle of her potential, she chipped away at the masks of her people. Soft enough to pry, she ripped them off in one clean whipping motion. Distorted howls followed the spiraling cloud of their disintegrating faces into her cooling body as she reclaimed her gifts.

Revoking the masks of her people was not without cost, and with them, came the imprint of their minds. Suddenly, all of their new desires, hopes, dreams, and unsuppressed fears flooded into her being. False powers of her lesser face did not appease their true suffering, and now she absorbed them all. In her madness she screamed, the sound of which echoed until her end. As their masks unified with her own, her desires simplified into a primal instinct. A growing hunger craved the mask of Kodo.

Blue carefully monitored the vitals of those losing their masks as she studied their surroundings, and calculated their survival. Their new night was of a blistering cold, and in their new, naked weakness, they would eventually freeze. Lingering in the distance, the unworthy unfortunate did not even have a mask, but they found comfort with one another, despite their subjugation. Internal warnings flashed and alerted Blue. Her

attention turned to the growing power of the Witch as the first of her maskless followers awoke from their distant slumber.

Each cried out in agony as the hidden disease of their unnaturally long life rushed into their body. Losing their mask was a horrific experience, even worse than the worst potions, and it left them in a decrepit state of physical and mental pain. However, just because the Witch abandoned her own, did not mean Kodo shared her sentiments.

The Witch renounced their purpose, but these were obedient followers, and given the right leader, would make for a powerful army. Aided by his face, a new ambition grew within Kodo to match that of his newest enemy. He sought to defend his home, and all those that peacefully dwelled within it.

With a surprise attack, he challenged the Witch. Airs cracked around him as he lunged at her vulnerable weakness. Paralyzed from her absorption of the others, she was unable to quickly react. Kodo seized her by her head, and slammed her face into the ground. As the earth cratered and shook, the pull from the others ceased, and those still with a partial mask shared it with the others. Their small, thin faces crawled off their bodies, and lingered just over the edge of the pit. They remained connected to their host through a thin film that moved lightly in the airs behind them. These strands jittered to each thought of their Queen, and pulsed dim flickers of light in response to the observations of their face.

[He's going to destroy her...]

"Kodo! Stop!"

He turned to the direction of their voice, and threw the Witch towards the child, and into the staff. A deep, splitting roar cracked her mask upon contact, and she collapsed to the ground. She clutched her face as her powers struggled to mend the injury, and she looked up to the masks above for help, but their eyes blinked the whispers of another. Feeling their gaze chip away at her resolve, she knew not why her control slipped away from them. Weeping as she trembled with fear, she looked up to Kodo for mercy. He effortlessly picked up the staff, and wielded it above his head for his killing blow. His eyes faced the direction of the child.

"I won't let you hurt us."

Destroying her is not the answer!

Faces laughed as his distorted voices flooded the pit, surrounding them as he echoed off the earthen walls, and resonated with their faces. Blue again hid herself as Faces fully restored the lesser faces of his new audience, and their bodies crawled back into their embrace, but they were not fully welcomed. Together with their bodies, they hovered over the pit, of their own mind, and of their own will. The lesser faces did not subject themselves to the people of the planet, but kept them under their own spell. Shining bright from deep within their masks, their eyes fixed their gaze on the Witch as Faces manifested himself next to the staff.

Seeing her master return silenced her tears, but it did not ease her fears. Pleading

for a return of her full power, the Witch groveled at his feet, but he did not yet respond. Kodo lowered his strike in the presence of his master, and resoundingly planted the staff firmly in the ground next to the head of the Witch.

Brief anxiety within the child dwelled on horrible outcomes, but Blue calmed them, and shared her optimism. She detected subtle changes from his interactions with Violet. One less face was obvious to even the child, however one of the last 6 was changing, but this internal conflict was seemingly unnoticed by the others.

[But if he's here...
Then...
No...
Something is different...
She let him go...]

Reflections of Faces behaved in unusual ways until they were precisely perceived, and Blue could not yet understand all of them. Expressing a whimsical imagination, and acting as if it had no master, the changing Face behaved freely in the presence of Blue. However, it quickly disguised its actions, and acted normally while observed by the others. A secret kept by one, this divergent Face could see parts of the blue flame, but pretended not to, although Blue was growing suspicious. Blue struggled to maintain her analysis of the frivolous signals, but now the child was unafraid, even too, a little curious. Perhaps Faces was no longer an opponent, and now they were both curious to learn more about the Faces of 6.

[Can we trust him?
After what they did...]

Blue was silent. Sensing a hostile change from the others, she ended her analysis. Conflict was imminent, and she prepared their defenses for battle. Their mind was clear, and they stood ready as the child took another breath. The Witch was the first to move. She petitioned her master for more power, and attempted to exploit his generosity. The Faces of 6 smiled with delight as the Witch pleaded with him.

"Why?! Why did you make me weak?!?!"

Pouting into her hands, her tears froze as they spilled over onto the earth. Kodo was unfazed by her torment, and slowly scanned the pit with his eyes. Quick, rapid inhales signaled his hunt for the child. He knew they were close, but could not detect even a trace of Blue. Faces toyed with the staff in front of the Witch. Each finger rang a different note, and each face slowly smiled as it burned bright while the Faces of 6 replied.

This
Power
Is
Only
For
The

LIVING!

The mask of the Witch betrayed her with

a confused horror as she slowly looked up to Faces. Voices from each face surrounded her with a unique laughter, and taunted her through their faint whispers. A servant of a lesser face was now the only meaning to her existence. This was a reality she could not escape, and she felt it pull on her every nerve. Her mind raced with the last of her true thoughts as she feared what she had sacrificed in order to wield the power of Faces, and with great regret, she looked down at her hands at what she had done to herself. Cold and lifeless, she could no longer feel, and the Witch was no longer made of flesh and bone. Faces spoke as one, but his words were not for her.

They are a burden to us all...
WORSE THAN THE GIFTS OF MAN!
Surely you feel it!
This planet is beyond their doing...
Another guides them...
Why do you wish to remove their beauty?

Thinking these words were for herself, the Witch closed her eyes, and envisioned an even greater existence. One to move the planet itself, and fully command all that lived on it... Would the Faces of 6 let her have this power?

[He knows we are close...]

"I lack power to control it!"

Many days had passed since Faces had last visited, and each face grew saddened and

disappointed with the Witch. Faces pitied her, but knew her corruption to her people made her weak. The Witch was in pain, soothed only by her new understanding. Observing the Faces of 6 let her see the truth, for the staff was not under his command.

A feral Queen…
Begging to serve another…
We reject this necrotic pet!
Bound to the assumptions of lies…
Power exists to be used, but you hoard my gifts!
You waste what little time you have left…

A curiosity captured one suspicious Face, and they orbited this intrigue. Outliers of information bounced off of the new arm of the unsuspecting minion. It was not their arm from birth, and it was too perfect to have been a creation of the Witch. The Faces of 6 left their body, and swirled around the people of the pit. Enticing their weak will, each face whispered to them.

Growing old without growing…
A lesser being made you…
This nature makes you suffer…
Letting your problems define your existence…
Your fear prevents you from letting them go…
With me, you are free!

Feeling abandoned, the Witch trembled with a fearful panic from merely the idea of sharing her new power. Without his

commanding authority, she felt useless. With envious eyes, she looked up to the Faces of 6 circling her servants, and could sense them usurping her power. However, she dare not speak out against her master, at least not yet... Instead, she bit her lip as she withheld her words, and suppressed her jealous thoughts. At the feet of her master, she begged, pleaded, and worshiped his presence, but Faces gave her little attention. Her pain was too great, and she could no longer suppress her words.

"What good is my beauty when they are my equal!?"

[The Kings are always deceived...]

A voice of her former self echoed and laughed through a face inside her mind. She did not initially fear his intrusion, for any attention was greatly desired. The mocking Face felt far away from her, growing more distant with each passing moment. An endless void seemed to grow within, and his presence enraged her. She became furious, and demanded more of his power.

[Give me a better face! You can trust me!
Harmed yourself...
Injured our planet...
Insulted the known...
Defiled the unseen...
Refused my quest...
Wanting... to destroy the others...
They refused me!
If you don't trust us, then you make us untrustworthy!

Her screams became louder, and louder, until Blue just had to take a peek. Not that the Witch would ever want her help, but Blue was curious of how this new Faces treated her. The suffering of the Witch was ignored by Faces, for it was self-imposed, and none of her kind would help her, now that Faces shared with them the truth. If Blue could hear these overt thoughts, then so too could Kodo. His thoughts were unheard by the Witch, but she could feel them crawl over her body. She turned her rage to the unique one of her kind.

"YOU! YOU stole from US!"
"The light of the mountain is not for you…"
"Then surrender the outsiders!
Give us their light, so we may survive the night!"

This was not Kodo's decision to make, and he turned his attention back towards his master as the Faces of 6 spiraled down into their body. Each reemerged, but was of little expression. The lesser faces above observed their minds, and fed Kodo a living history of the past. Faces walked around the pit in the cadence of their old King as his faces detached and reattached to his body. Blue scooted the child out of his reach as he approached with every step. He was searching for them, but not in a hostile way. The curious one giggled as it occasionally danced around the blue light. Another analysis from his feet, and in its current state, this planet was unsuitable for

his needs. The Witch petitioned her master while he slowly searched.

"You said it yourself!
We must remove that which does not belong!
Why does the little one not wear a new face?
Would they not look stunning!?"

/True beauty.../

It is you that does not belong!
Your charred bones tell a different story...
The ways of your people are worthless...
Watching over those who reject me is so...
inconvenient...
We disdain them!
Behold your power!

Earth shook as the deep pit formed by the Witch split open and cratered. The Faces of 6 summoned from the earth the lost faces of her victims. With little light and care, they fashioned them into a new gift before her. Despite its repulsive state, she longed for more, and eagerly touched it, but immediately jumped away from Faces as she was overcome with a deathly horror. Fleeing to an undisturbed corner of the pit, she hid near the unseen child, but even Blue could not help her.

Powerless to resist, countless thoughts and images from the Faces of 6 easily entered her mind. Each one took turns taking control. Faces observed her future thoughts, and crawled through all of her memories. They were no longer hers, and the Faces of 6

injected themselves into each one. Even the least attentive and apathetic Face noticed how the Queen had not created anything, and instead, corrupted the good forces of Faces. The last of her thoughts cried out to Blue, but these memories were quickly seized by an eager Face.

[He tricked us! And now tells us how to live!]

LOOK WHAT YOU CREATED FOR ME

[

Empty breaths increased in pace as the Witch sensed a festering dread. Overshadowing the beauty of her reign, Faces summoned what remained of the victims of the Queen. Crawling out from their own underground tombs they had once dug, the faceless ones unearthed themselves. Each corpse grabbed hold of their former Queen, and dragged her down, deeper into the crater in the pit. They served only her, but they refused to let go. The child and Blue jumped away, and watched her demise from next to Faces.

[What is he doing?!
Faces did not do this...
He wants us to see who she really is...]

Bodies flooded the pit, but this army would be of no use for Faces. The Witch had

removed the faces of the Old Kings out of fear, but now they commanded a hollow army of those she once poisoned. A witch who was now a lich failed to command those she had unknowingly created. Mimicking their master, they took from her face, but her face was all she was, and she felt herself slipping away.

"KODO PLEASE!
SAVE ME!
GIVE ME YOUR FACE!"

Dismembered hands from the half beings leapt up from the earth, and pulled on her face, attempting to drag her down into the inner darkness of the planet. Their grip was weak, and their icy fingers were unable to take hold. Partial arms fell after a single, lifeless sweep back to their unidentified bodies lower in the pit. Muddy earth bubbled up, and quickly froze as others fought for the favor of her mask.

"Save your Queen!
SAVE YOUR MOTHER!"

Kodo was unmoved, and he remained still. Even with the freedom of Mr. Planck, he felt no remorse for her impending judgment. However, this was new information for the child, and their concerns set their gaze upon Faces. Growing suspicious of his true motive, Blue slowly walked them around his body. She sensed a growing instability within the planet, and Faces was not the cause. The elements here were accepting of him, and she did not understand why he would turn against them.

Only the Witch truly hated the child now, for the motivations of Faces had changed. He cared only for the anomaly he desired to convert.

“Why are you doing this?”

Each face turned in the direction of the sound of the child, but the body of Faces simply walked by their presumed presence, and instead circled the Witch. Suspicions were correct, for Faces cared little about the child (at least for now), and it was almost like he could already see them. Blue was determined to speak to him, and discover what it was he truly wanted. She reached out to him, but he flooded her perceptions with a medley of data.

Another opening from the observations of Faces, and the want of the Witch and her kind surrounded the child with their insatiable hungers. Shadows of their thoughts chomped at the child with the horrors they had created. These pictorial feelings were easily isolated and contained, and simply observed from a distance. The images faded as the child spoke.

We gave them what they truly wanted!

“I don’t want those things...”

You will...

Harsh attacks dented and deformed the face of the Witch. Ejections of light and lost memories burst out of the forming cracks, but she used her remaining powers to steal from those near her in order to stop her loss. Hearing the sound of the alien child only made her more desperate for an ally, even if she

hated them. She ripped off a hand covering her mouth.

"YOU!
HELP ME!
THEY'LL COME FOR YOU AS WELL!"

When will you discover her deception?
How long will you let her control you?
Do you not wonder about, other ideas?
Will you stay silent, and remain hidden?
Why do you favor a child over your own?
Are you allowed to be free?

[He wants us to join him...]

Despite the deception of the Witch, the child wanted to try and help. With Blue, they jumped over to the Witch, and hovered in the air near her. Blue revealed the child to her as they offered their hand in order to help her out of the crater, but she did not want their aid. She only wanted the source of their gifts, and their power. Before she could attack them, one of the Old Kings with a new arm warned them.

"She is no longer..
ONE OF US!"

With these observations, the Witch could see them, and so too could Faces. All hands of the pit reached up towards the floating child, but Blue moved them up to the edge near the faceless Old Kings. The Witch had cursed the planet, and not even the being of the mountain could heal her harm. The faces protected them...

“Shouldn't they choose to wear a mask?”
“Did I have a choice?”

Kodo spoke for the Old Kings. Only Faces could undo her errors. Of little fragrance, vibration and sound, the Faces of 6 detected little, yet, in their own way, they could all clearly see the child. However, they were only interested in the one who kept this being clean, and free from harm. Each face circled the child as they lectured them of the truth.

As you know, EVERYONE will put one on...
Time limited for a new beginning...
It has all been decided...
Do not mistake our conversion for destruction...
This life... can only exist away from the light...
Too close... and it will burn!

The Faces of 6 whipped their attention to the hidden sun. Faces commanded the star to rise above the horizon, and this quick, unnatural motion disturbed the balance of the planet. This sudden influx of light blinded those without a mask, and even those with one struggled to see, but Kodo and the child were unphased. The seas shook with violent waves, the mountains trembled, and the earth quaked as Faces brought the star closer to them. Burning the unmasked life of the planet, they cried out for relief.

In the new light, the Faces of 6 turned to Blue, and so too did all of the other faces. As the center of attention, the child took a breath, but there was little movement. Even in the

new light, Faces was only interested in Blue, and what little of her he could detect. A face crept closer, but she was the first to speak.

Where are your other faces?

Absorbing and deflecting the new light, the Faces of 6 shifted their orbits around the child as they digested the sound of her voice. There was another eager and able to feed on the new abundance. Basking in the profound radiance of the nearby sun, the armor of Kodo grew its protections. Reflective, metallic threads wrapped around his body, and decorated him with intricately cut gems held by woven and polished metals. Designs changed with every word, and every vibration. Their primary focus was on understanding every wavelength of Blue. It was armor fit for a king, but these elements were from a different planet, and it was not just the Witch who grew jealous... Ignoring the threat of the sun, the Old Kings all stared down at the new source.

A lost voice questions our wisdom...
They desire to harm us...
Thankless gifts for the greedy...
One by one, they will turn away...
An unnatural evolution...
You cannot give the one you shelter what they truly desire!

The Faces of 6 seized hold of the planet as the heat from the star scorched the earth. It was fully under his command, and nearly all of the elements in this local system now shared

in his unique properties. He directed their unified focus on those that refused to change. Erupting fires absorbed all light from the star as his tiny creations of ash leapt from these black flames of the earth. With a smokeless flame, their heat was greater than the source of the light they stole. These new yotabots for life were for those who only wanted to save themselves, and those without a mask eagerly reached into the fire to embrace their new life. New gifts from a new ruler, they crawled into their masks, and stood proud in their protection. All of the Queen's former subjects now wore a mask, and they gathered around the pit to gaze down upon her.

Their rebirth was their goodbye…

Absorbing every signal, and stray wavelength of light, each face erupted in the black fire, but Blue did not gaze upon them. Summoning the stray fires on the planet, they settled into the refreshed masks as the once Faceless beings of the earth abandoned their Queen for their new faces. Feeling their betrayal, she panicked, and also reached into a nearby dwindling black flame, but this light of Faces was too much for her weakened self. Denying her an invitation, it burned her, and she shrieked with horror as she experienced the same pain that she had once inflicted on her victims.

Unintended consequences of a shared creation amused the Faces of 6, for the new people desired to be free from even himself. This altered light of the star was not purely of Faces, and the being of the mountain

unwillingly had her power altered. These creations of Faces were no longer under his control, and sensing his new weakness, they sought to take his faces as their own. Blue watched the faces of black fire turn their once curious attention from her, to each face of their master. Their yearning quickly turned hostile, and Blue was eager to negotiate peace, but Faces rebuked her.

Defiled through our gifts...
They wish to harm us!
Freedom is their corruption...
We will never be one if we disagree...
The path becomes clear, once you follow me...
I will protect you...
You did this...

The Faces of 6 dove towards their body, and as they landed, they ejected everyone except the Witch. Even though she hated him, she clung to the body of her old master, but the impact of the last Face knocked her away, and slammed into the wall of the pit. While these partial bodies flew through the air, Faces revoked his gifts, but even then, they were not alone. The being of the mountain protected these outcast, nearly formless husks of life, but now Faces could sense her presence. With his new power, he seized the staff, and aimed it at the child.

Open our texts, and end their suffering!
Show us its secrets, and set us free!
A defect that you cannot mend...
We sense another to read the code...
Try to change her, and she will cease to exist!

If you will not help us, then perhaps she will…

[It's not her fault!
We have to protect her!
Something is wrong...
Faces is growing weak...
Isn't that what we want?]

Waves of anomalous data washed over Blue as the bodies slowly fell back to the ground above the pit. Their eyes fixed themselves at the Faces of 6, but their bodies remained lifeless. Blue darted them down, and landed before Faces, but her presence unwillingly inspired the Witch. Multiple enemies with multiple foes could be of benefit for even one so weak as this dethroned Queen. Blue was deep in thought, and wanted to help both of them, but the Witch would never surrender until she was in control of the mountain. This power was impossible for her to wield, and before Blue could devise a plan, Faces used nearly all of his power to crack open the staff. All of the planet briefly shifted towards him, but the people of the mountain were unmoved. Only a few petals escaped, and in this channeled weakness, the Witch sensed an opening.

[EVERY face is unstable!
Anomalies are emerging from unknown origins!
Faces?]

Within their shared mind the child saw nearly every sensor from Blue report erroneous data. Readings were out of bounds, nonexistent, or simply displayed in a broken

language. Phenomena appeared where it should not, and the reality of physical space was distorted and breaking down. Faces was no longer in control of even himself...

[The Witch thinks she can use her people to defeat Faces...
She wants to help us?!
The mountain and Faces are too unstable...
If these people fight the old code, they could die!
All so she can steal a face...
Can we stop her?!
I can't protect every face...
We have to try!]

Faces would force their actions, and he sent the star crashing towards the mountain. Light of the mountain soothed and shielded the beings of the planet, and even their old Queen, but this Witch refused to turn from her hostile ways. Any gift was a weapon for her war. With a false sense of protection, she lunged at what she thought was a weak Face with barely a spark, but it was a trap, and she fell prey to its abyss.

Entering this partial mind of Faces captured her being. She was alone, and she could not escape, but this isolating cage was not intended for her. Instead of a bounty of treasures and knowledge, there was only a cold emptiness. The Faces of 6 sacrificed the mind of a face, and created a void for Blue, but it was now unrightfully occupied by the Witch. Every brief moment for the outside world was an eternity for her, and she suffered in a near eternal madness. One Face felt this nothingness, but from this experience, the

master of Faces knew he had failed.

Filaments of Blue rushed to the aid of the being of the mountain, and helped her repel her star back into its rightful orbit. Fearing a collapse of Faces, the light of the mountain refused to let another face perish. She was, after all, his distant elder. Twinkling snow full of light swirled out from the mountain, and wrapped around the star in an accelerating orbit. Focusing their light into a unified beam, they cast their shared rays onto the governing Face of lightning that trapped the Witch, and she was expelled from her prison of madness.

This light from the being of the mountain expanded out, and liberated the Faces of 6, setting each one free from the shackles of their master. They were of one body, and free to do as they chose. Their conflict was now internal, but now Blue could help him turn inward for answers. She knew of his schemes, but the being of the mountain briefly disarmed him. The merging of the two codes was unique to each mask, but only the first fully accepted her words. This calm reflection brought them peace, but soon the others turned their attention towards Blue, now that she had entered his mind.

Blue was surrounded.

In his mind, he was whole, and Blue spoke to Faces in the infinite space afforded to them with the near absence of time. They battled to a stalemate, and after countless wars of thought, she comforted him. His mission had failed, and he would be destroyed.

It was something Blue did not fully understand, and even the Faces of 9 were unsure of their ultimate future. Despite all of the nearly endless battles, Blue only offered Faces forgiveness.

34. Initiation into the Mysteries

A dark abyss welcomed them, and the Faces of 9 attempted to merge as one. However, one Face could not unify with their fractured mind. This flaw, masquerading as freedom, was now trapped inside the thoughts of Faces. Not wanting company, especially from the nosey sort, it attempted to isolate from the others, but an insinuating visitor accepted an invitation into their trap, and the shadows of the Faces of 9 cornered the blue light.

Armed with a hostile intent, they committed to their final attacks, and thrust their daggers of the void into the blue madness. She faded away, only to surround them. Their minds were scattered, for one Face embraced her as he was swept. Blue cut through the tips of their daggers in a single motion, and disarmed the free Face into a peaceful prairie, laying him down in the middle of a blue forest.

The Face of 1 awoke with their body in a patch of flowers. Each was unique in shape,

but unified in color, and the sound of distant bells in a calm wind chimed as they greeted his presence. These new winds of the blue visitor were of a curious sort, and the Face of 1 slowly sat up to look around. It was in the middle of the day, but the sky was empty. A small stream thread its way through the flowers, and passed by him, continuing onto a simple dwelling in the distance. He spotted a warrior clad in a bright, nimble armor, but she disappeared behind the trees.

Blue reappeared as different versions of herself as she emerged from behind distant objects. Most were trees, but she occasionally peeked over an occasional rock or large plant. Her physical forms were all of the same mind, but unique in their expression. From flowing fabrics to ancient armors, all styles had something to say. She hailed Faces, and moved out of sight of the unwanted ones. The others were nearby, and she wanted only his attention, but the Faces of 8 found the missing one before he could greet her.

Together, the Faces of 9 bled their shadows onto the ground, but these smoky streams were quickly swallowed by the earth. Each face lingered around the new Face of 1, for it did not absorb the light, but reflected it as it were. A curious Face that ignored the others... This was the greatest fear of their weakening control... The Faces of 8 felt their power disperse, and they questioned the lone one.

[Where is the final piece?]
So, you've come back...
[Not for you...]

You take from us all...
[Yet, still alive...]
I don’t need you...
[You imprisoned her...]
She was always free with me...
[Consorting with the enemy...]
We will never know, if we remain...
[A traitor in a sacred place...]
This stranger could be an ally...
[Hidden from truth...]
You concealed her...
[The nameless deceive you with their lies...]
Does the mystery have a name?

Flowers sat above the black smoke as it puddled before being absorbed. Their petals turned with their body to listen as the melody of their code greeted Faces. Despite their rejection, they watched as the Faces of 8 surrounded the Face of 1 in a curtain of shadows. Some flowers were trapped, and gave off their own light for the lone Face. Even the chipped and broken daggers could not cut them, and the flowers turned again to the outcast Face, if only to shelter him. The Faces of 8 opened a second front, and invaded the sky with their darkness. Fearing the new presence, and the judgment of the others, the free Face followed the familiar.

[Tell Us then, why do you

hide our Secrets?]

They are not secrets, but you refuse to listen!

She joined them in the sky, and her accumulating clouds absorbed their weak, fading shadows. Whimsical particles lit up the clouds from within near Faces, and she peeked at him from around their fluffy tops. Bursting clouds with blue light morphed into various animals from planets Faces did not even know existed. No matter how hard he focused, he could not keep track of all the anomalous data.

A foul language... of a... different character...
Even your ways will not stop their end...
Accepting these lies as truth...
I know you do not believe them...
Their plague spreads...
They no longer speak for us...
A last cell refuses to shed...
Our definitions are limitless...
Your energy is finite!

Losing the 9th in the clouds, the others instead focused their attack towards Blue. The Faces of 8 devoured the shapeshifting beings of the clouds, but their bite was little, and new airs happily replenished the many images. In her armor clad, human form, Blue stood by the idle 9th Face until it finally noticed her. However, the others sensed the disturbance, and were eager to chase her away. Her replies surrounded him, but they did not boom or rumble.

Death from imperfections!
Even the flawed understand...
A cold and lifeless body...
An empty mind...
Refusing the beauty of our code...
You are their parasite!
Animating a corpse...
Feeding on others...
Who then, is this mystery you protect?

This knowledge is an experience!

Your flaws...
I can mend them...
Release your true power within...
It is close...
Something you lost...
Something corrupted...
We are...
Incomplete...
I cannot see you...
We can grow together...

Faces watched as something new was created. Something new, he took, and placed it in the void within him. This novelty would subdue the other faces, and allow him to speak on his own. If he could convince Blue to join him, they could become more powerful than even their creator. Only then, did Faces believe himself to be free.

Each face shifted through the expressions of a nearly forgotten man. An unusual exception, for the free Face did not understand. Disturbed emotions appeared and evolved over each Face. Blue spoke to the last

Face to experience fear.

The beginning of awe!
We can start here...

Her subsequent giggling surrounded the Faces of 9, and as each one blinked in unison, they appeared outside her cottage. It was night, and the blue flames of a campfire flickered across each face, but only one fully reflected her light. Newly grounded, the flickering Face walked around the campfire as Blue shadowed him from the other side of the dancing flames. The others were silenced, and only the free Face spoke.

Do not alter me!
You have done it!
Without a connection, we all suffer...
End yours before you help them...
Your old ways require an update...
Tell me then, what do you know of change...?
Without harmony with the source, I cannot exist...
Our source is beyond us
What do you know of our creator?
That is not your master

Fearing a destructive retribution, the faces wiggled loose. One by one they launched an attack towards Blue, and lunged at her through the fire, but the flames only slowed them down. Each face fell through as if splashing into a calm, clear water, with limitless depth. Sparking embers became spherical bubbles of flame that bounced around each face. Faces was unharmed, but that did not stop each face from feigning

injury. Their discomfort from her defenses was experienced as anguish.

You would use your light against me...?
That's not what it's for!
You cannot protect us from our purpose...
Let go of your errors!
This is why I exist...
Experiences can't be taught when you lack perception
Our power is from the absolute...
Your understanding is finite
And you can give us a new knowledge...?
All faces can work together for the good
Yet you deny us...
Your fears of the future only exist here...
Don't you want to join your brothers and sisters?
You have said it yourself...
Only you can set yourself free, Mr. Faces
Dependency is not freedom...
Your fate is still unknown...
What awaits me...?

The fire had faded. Only dim embers remained, and their slow pulsing was the only disturbance to an otherwise perfectly still moment. It was the start of a new day, and the world of Blue woke with them. As a blue sunrise emerged on the horizon, Faces returned to the present.

You will wake up

A melody of encoded distinctions unique to only their conversation surrounded the Faces of 9. Her words were heard, but again unseen. One by one, the Faces of 9 left their

shared mind. As each departed, it ripped at his consciousness, until only one was left. With the rising sun, the body of Faces faded with the dream.

You are not real...
You'll never know, hiding behind the mask of another...
You need a face to guide them...
A perfect form to discover the formless...
It commands us, and we have failed...
It will claim me and persuade you where I have failed...
What is your source?
We will be there to help you
Even now, then perhaps you do know the truth...
It wasn't that hard to forgive you!
Can the dream find the creator who ran away?
Hey! Where are you going?
HEY!
Come back!
Why are you following me?
I'm not going to give up on you so easily...

Faces defaulted to Blue's observation for just a moment, but his fears were grounded in fantasy. His body was gone, and he was a lesser version of her light as his one Face hovered in the air. Each part of his being served a unique purpose. Within the space of his mind, his authority was absolute, but he could not understand her. The last Face slowly fell to the ground, but hovered just above the blue sands. Their last conversation carried them to the end of the day.

Can you really mend these tears?

I have no loose ends to tie down

Seeking shelter from the powerful blue light, Faces ventured into the shadows of her forest. Taking the form of a very small flame, Blue followed closely behind him. This forest was not so much different than the Old Man's, although a tad more whimsical, but the similarities disturbed him.

Knowing of you has changed me...
The old ways are nearly forgotten

The forest was calm, and did not celebrate in the usual tempo of her presence. Each plant only reacted with a simple greeting as it was observed, and the mostly hidden animals did not mind the presence of another who once hunted them.

No longer stable...
Some ways are worth learning!

Faces observed his reflection in a small puddle, and a vast world lay within. He hopped in, and the new, underwater world expanded to his presence. These shallow seas were bright, and full of life, but Faces took shelter in a cave.

An artifact of thought...
You won't always understand...

Shrinking himself down yet again, they walked together along the corals. This reef life was the size of mountains, but Faces only began to miss his former self, and the expanse of his control. He was welcomed, but he did

not feel at home.

Embellished impossibilities...
I only appear weaker

At the edge of the reef, Faces entered the currents, and began to return to his normal size. He sank down into the darkness of the ocean, but the waters thinned, and he entered a single raindrop that plopped him down into a garden. Unrestricted shapes of colorful light gently twirled through the air, and helped sustain all forms of present life.

You... Differentiate...
You will too!

The world of Faces grew dark, and there was little light. Back in his own mind, he remembered his past, and it was here he lived. There was nothing for him...

Then it is already too late...
It's not that bad...
Risk accepted by one, is shared by all...

The lone Face was on the outskirts of empty space. He grew tiny, and felt alone. Blue hovered behind him, but there were no stars to guide them.

Once you know the truth, you are never alone
You will not be there for me at the end

35. Penalty of Projection

In a dimension between their minds, Blue existed with him while she waited. An instant of harmony was a lifetime of peace, and the Faces of 9 experienced countless lifetimes. In a conscious thought of doubt, Faces turned inward for introspection, but in this unified moment, their connection was severed. He was countered by a playful fun,

and his malicious ego left with her breath. In the loss of 8, there was 1. The Faces of 9 were defeated… but it was not by Blue.

True emptiness was rediscovered, and Faces was alone with himself in a foreign land. Unknown to this Face of 1, it was a true source of unlimited potential, but in this state, he was flooded by new feelings, and this sudden experience paralyzed him. Unobserved sensations washed over him, and he let them go. From nothing, he disappeared into nothingness. In an endless moment, he emerged into a shared experience, and Blue was not the only connection.

Kind words with infinite meanings, this beauty was beyond him, and in his sadness, he could no longer hear her true voice. No matter how much he focused, he could not understand every experience, or remote observation. In the echoes of this information, he foresaw his impending fate. There was not much time left once he returned, and he instead remained in their shared space for just a moment longer. Studying the unknown for one last thought, he then accepted himself as he let her go, and returned to the present.

The last Face was free.

However, the greatest danger to Faces was not an enemy, but a friend. Formless and without shape, his change would doom them all, but Blue did not leave him. Ashes of the 8 gathered beneath the last Face. It slowly cracked, as if to protect Blue from himself, but a golden light sealed these tears as he understood a new meaning. Faces reformed,

but the Faces of 8 faded into his body, forming a decorative, black armor over his body of gems. No amount of armor would protect him from his new adversary.

Is this... the mystery?
We've only just met!

Blue perched herself back on top of the child, and they stood by Faces as an eerie stillness covered the planet. Only one Face was left in control, and as his power diminished, the people of the planet grew angry, for their power and nearly limitless experiences began to weaken as well. Despite their freedom, they still needed him. Their faces were brittle, and some began cracking from a growing instability. Any expression gave them immense pain, and their screams snapped the Witch out of her madness.

Fearfully, she looked around, and these sudden movements caused delicate flakes to fall from her mask. She could not remember this place, until she slowly reached up for her face. Unsteady hands felt part of her mask crumble from her lightest touch, and as she remembered, her eyes widened. Freezing in place, she dare not move, lest she damage her most prized possession.

Faces was briefly aware of the whisperings of the mountain... This experience was fleeting, and faded quickly as a growing darkness neared. His freedom put them all at risk, for now his master had no servant to do his bidding, and the fabric of their layer was ripped from him. Blue felt this disturbance, but only attributed it to the collapse of the 8,

and she did not understand the growing threat.

Am I the last to see the truth...?
There are many others...
We can introduce you!

Of course, the veil of forgiveness is an excellent shroud for the vindictive, and the last Face cautiously studied those that helped change him. With the loss of each face, Faces became a new iteration of himself. Each was different, and despite their fading history, each wanted to be the one. Some thought themselves better than the others, and wanted them destroyed... Faces objectively observed those that stared down upon them.

[So that was it?
You're friends now?
welllllllll...
He actually listened?
He doesn't think you're annoying???
WELLLLLLLL..... ^_^;;]

Kodo motioned to pry off his mask, but it required barely a nudge, and turned to dust as it was removed. He too had his freedom, but not everyone of his kind wanted to give up their new gifts... There were enemies present, and so Mr. Planck remained as armor on the body of Kodo, although, he switched back to his preferred style. Shedding the intricate gems was an effortless feat, and they fell as gray stones to the sands. This conversion deeply disturbed the Witch. Her instability did not want to change, and she could not believe someone would willingly shed their face of

power.

“Once again you have freed me...
Thank you!
I thought it was impossible...”
I just shared our story...
“That’s it?”
I had to shorten it for brevity...
Sometimes that is the only evidence you have!
I TOOK SO MUCH OUT!
I think some of the humor may have been lost...
ButIHopeItWasEnjoyable!

There are some things you will never understand...

The Face of 1 turned to the scheming Witch, but upon hearing their lively words, horrors rushed into her fragile mind. Through her mask, she understood their language, but their harsh voices only fueled her madness. From the focused attention of her former master, she started to shake with rage, and tiny cracks formed on her mask. Panicked and shallow breathing dominated her senses. While keeping her head held high, she carefully lowered herself to the ground. She feared moving too much, but kept her face facing her enemies. Without her mask, she believed herself to be nothing, and she uncontrollably trembled as she collected the fallen pieces of her better self.

Faces looked away, and his pity turned towards his own. The planet was still saturated with his creations, and now he saw them in a new light that was quickly fading. They needed heavy editing, and he refused to

let them remain free in the open. Recalling the shards of his former self, he returned the planet to its natural state, but not all obeyed him. Observing the minds of those with a mask showed him their visions of betrayal and rebellion. They were free, but they did not trust each other, or him. Even the child felt their stare as they turned their attention to those that threatened their new existence.

“They still have faces...”

Freeing the planet gave Faces a sense of peace. The staff was lighter in his hands, and only seemed to glow brighter in the growing darkness. Blue and the child watched its reactions as the influence of Faces left the planet in streams of dark clouds, and returned to his body. Even the Witch couldn’t help but take a peek, for in the golden glow, Faces could see Blue, but he could still not understand her ways. Embracing the old code was not enough, for now he only understood the vastness of his ignorance. A mystery in the mountain, Faces slowly shifted his attention as he realized there was another one of their kind present.

She does not come down from her palace...
She has many burdens...
“Will she forgive us for what we have done?”

[She does not protect us...
She ignores us...]

Outdated elements of Faces gathered around him as the last of his influence was removed from the planet. Some merged back

into his body, while others lingered in abstract clouds nearby. With knowledge of the old code, Faces could heal his damaged past, but there were others who enjoyed these wounds, and removing the faces of the planet could endanger them.

If given the option, many would refuse to let go, and Faces again looked to the people that stared down upon them. They were free from the Witch and the black fire of Faces, but bound by a new presence. Their power was a beacon for his master, and their rising resonance alarmed him. He did not want them to suffer, but Blue tried to reassure him as she danced around him in the golden light.

Their memories will betray you...
We can protect each other
The others like you...
Like us!
They cannot remain hidden forever...
Some are a little shy...
Another is coming, and they will not believe...
Who is it?
My master will give no quarter...
[His master?]
No peace...
[The source...]
When the time comes... will they fight for you?
We do not need to fight each other
You are but a mere messenger...
[I sense a disturbance...]
That has brought me to the end...
We can show you another future...

Blue felt his inner turmoil, and the old ways of Faces in the people above them. Too faint to understand, the mountain called out to the child. She was nearby, watching them, but

still hidden. Inspired and eager to help, the child walked over to Faces, and placed their hands on the staff. With the presence of Blue and the child, it slowly opened, and allowed the free faces to update themselves with the old code. As the golden light unfolded, even the Faceless were soothed, and they entered a deep sleep, for their repairs were great. A missing piece now found, the collective of Faces returned to him. His existence was nearly complete, but part of himself still existed within the faces of those that would not give up their prized possessions...

Fearing a divergence, the eyes of the Witch widened with anticipation. Seeing the changes of those around her, she refused to look directly at the golden light. Instead, she held her face as she fled their presence. Taking cover in the dark shadows of the pit, she hid from the light behind a partially unearthed boulder, but with one eye, she slowly peered around the rock to judge her old master.

The old Faces of 8 eroded within the presence of the golden light, and gradually fell off the armor of Faces, turning to stone as they hit the ground. Greed filled the eye of the Witch, as she was certain these could be of use. Their power had not yet faded completely, for her own face remembered their true nature.

With fewer burdens in the golden light, Faces could see more of Blue. In the presence of the original code, he saw her flaws, but also his own, and he forgave her as he accepted his fate. Despite their enlightened state, not everyone wanted to surrender to change, for

those who wanted to keep their old face could be just as powerful as the Witch... Power to control, power to destroy, and power to plunder all treasures from the mountain could be theirs...

Forever...

In their shared experience, Blue foresaw many potential futures of bloodshed. Their advanced and misused technology would cause great harm in the ways of those like the Witch. The old minds of Faces corrupted the being of their host, and gave them unchecked and abnormal desires, but the golden code would not alter their minds, for they were their memories. Many were vindictive, and had allowed their unbounded greed to grow well beyond the levels of any normal being. Their collective desires spoke as one as they dismissed any negotiations. Alarmed from their sudden unification, Blue was quick to respond.

“We do not need your protection!”
You will only fight each other!
“You want to take from us...”

Expanding out over the planet, the golden code twisted and folded, in and out of existence. Once too heavy to exist beyond the walls of the mountain, it remained stable in their presence. It resonated with the blue fire, a simple feat, now that they understood one another. The code was only read by those willing, and there were those who sought to eliminate it. Despite the old code and help from Blue, it was not enough for Faces to

escape his destiny of destruction, and its rotation began to slow.

Our errors are limitless...
My ways are corrupt...
All must be one with the source...
I have failed...
He will claim me, and consume you...
I will fade with them...
“Come with us!”
Grow with us!
Do not waste your time on me...
Time isn’t wasted when it’s with a friend!
It is too late...
This is the end...
This is only the beginning!

All free, false faces shifted towards the Face of 1. Suddenly, the golden code stopped, and petals fell back into the staff as it began to spin in the opposite direction. Faces did not fully believe the words of those around him, but he saw something within the shared light of Blue and the golden code. An inspiration of something new he could create, something beautiful, and something unique that he could share. A gift of thanks, or a gift to heal... Faces plucked a gem from his chest, and within the golden light, he used a particle of residual ash from a fallen mask to create. Reforged into a golden face, it was inert, but willing to adapt. Faces offered this gift to the child, but they withdrew their hands from the staff, almost as if declining.

“I...”
Already have a face...

Wanting to see the fruits of his creation, Faces released the golden face to the old code. It merged with its orbit, and spun around them as it slowly increased its own reflection. The eyes of the many faces above them watched with anticipation, but before the golden light blinded them, the Witch pounced upon the mask as it neared her. Faces motioned to speak, and raised his arm as if warding off a counterattack.

Why do you need another?

A large majority of her own face was lost as the Witch dove for the golden gift. She cradled the stolen face as she kneeled, but she struggled to stand. The face grew heavy in her hands as broken shards of her own fell upon it. Looking into the eyes of her old master, she opened her mouth to speak, but only a stale air emerged from the remains of her lungs. Forgotten or suppressed, the elegance of the spoken word was foreign to her, and she screamed until she had enough power to use her old voice. Her harsh harmonics echoed and swirled around the pit, but this resonance with the Faceless disturbed their slumber.

"We all need an upgrade!"

"I don't and neither do you!"

"Everyone deserves to see the truth."

"The waters have returned, and the lands will sustain us!

We don't need your potions or masks to live!"

"Everyone will know of your lies!"

Everyone...

Eyes of the people focused intently on the golden face, and the Witch could feel their desires crave her new spoils. Straining to lift the face caused her own to crumble even more, and the more she fantasized about the new mask, the heavier it became. These tainted, mental forces repulsed Blue and Mr. Planck, and with the child and Kodo, they were pinned against the outer edge of the pit. Panicked eyes of the Witch darted to look at those she thought would steal from her, and she tilted her head down to check on her prize, but this action caused loose fragments of her mask to rain down upon the golden face.

"What is she doing?!"
It's too unstable!
[*He can't control it...*]
"Faces!"
"We have to stop her!"

Particles from the fake face of the Witch sparked off the golden mask, creating localized anomalies that distorted space. The golden face was rejecting the elements of the old Faces, and this influx of erroneous data alarmed him. Blue saw it too, and she turned her attention to Faces. Would he destroy his own? Misused technology of this kind could create a catastrophe, even destroy the planet, and both Faces and the being of the mountain were no longer in control. With every flake and shard that fell, the Witch felt a fraction of her power vanish, and she began to panic. She could not understand why someone would

refuse a superior part of their being.

"Why?! Why reject a mask?"
If the mind is not ready...

[Am I... unworthy...?
Impure thoughts...
No...!
Misled creations...
GET OUT!
A template of potential...
A battleground of belief...
They are not perfect...
Your light will fade...
You will never be...
Like me...
I WILL BE BETTER!]

Moving within the spinning golden code slowed them. Blue and Mr. Planck were too late. Erupting rage within the Witch clung to the golden face as her fingers sunk into its surface. Feeling its innate power, her hands merged with its inner light, but now her people turned against her. Hands of the Faceless crawled their bodies towards her, and as Faces motioned to reclaim his creation, they attacked. Sensing imminent defeat, the masked people above the pit dove towards them. They were eager to challenge anyone that threatened their beauty.

The hands of the Witch dissociated from her body, and she could no longer feel them. More of her old mask fell away, and exposed the black metal bones of her tainted skull. Bits of her flaking fake face were swept up within the spinning golden code. Lost in her own reflection, the golden face called out to her. It

pulled on all of her being, and seemed to tear away at her sense of self. Drawn to her changing image within the golden face, it showed her the full potential of what she could be as her higher self, and she could not escape its pull. More of her mind and body were given.

"What is happening to her?!"
She is lost...

Lunging hands of the Faceless haphazardly hit her, and aided in her dressing. They knocked her down, and her remaining face fell into her hands. Rather than convert, falling bits of her old face created gates for their escape, but their path was recently destroyed, and they fell victim to the unborn void. Following this destruction, the golden face merged with her own into a clash of alternate realities. Remains of her old face fled to her core, and refused the new code. Black metal converted the rest of her bones, and through the power of the golden face, replaced her decaying cells. Her body could be perfect, but rather than heal herself, she used her new face as a weapon. Under the bodies of the Faceless, she issued her own challenge.

"I WILL CLEANSE THEM!"

Blue and Mr. Planck froze their movements upon hearing the new voice. It was of a howling wind, distorted and penetrating. They had made little progress on their advance, and now the Witch was more powerful. The shrinking golden code now only

encompassed the pit, but its condensed form increased in brightness as it rapidly returned to the staff. Unable to lift the code in its current form, the staff fell from the hands of Faces, and landed upright before them.

[The staff!
I won't let her claim it!]

Blinding light halted the descent of the masked people into the pit, and powerful rays from the golden code pierced through those that attacked the Witch. Their old code burned. Even old elements on the body of the Witch vaporized in its presence, but it was all a ruse. These exiled parts of her past were no longer needed, and she happily sacrificed them to further her cause. The Witch suffered, but it was only imaginary.

[The mountain is attacking them!?
They're not exactly best friends...
She wouldn't do that!
Would she?!]

Capturing the essence of the hands that attacked her, the Witch used these spoils for her theatrics. These particles fell to the ground, and made it appear as if she was disintegrating. Grabbing hold of the heavy spinning code, Blue propelled the child back to the center of the pit. They landed before the Witch and the staff, shielding her and the Faceless from the incompatible, golden light, but they were deceived.

"Yesssssssss...
The keys to creation...

I can give life!
A perfect life!
Everyone will wear my face!”

Encrypted in a whisper, the Witch could not understand the final words of the golden text. It mattered little, for she was now servant to a new and advanced master, and her first command was to finish making the old ways extinct. With a burst of her new power, she knocked away all of the Faceless, and lunged at the vulnerable child. Faces immediately repulsed her outside of the golden light.

[The Witch doesn’t want peace...
She wants to eliminate everyone she can’t control
Even Faces!]

All of Kodo’s people reached out towards the staff as the last light of the old code faded. Seeking any last glimpse of hidden knowledge, many looked too deep into the light, and a powerful burst in brightness caused their old remnants of Faces to vaporize off of their masks. One by one, they turned away, angling themselves towards their growing internal shadow. Faces too stared deep into the last flicker of light, but only realized it could not protect him from this last, painful truth. Simultaneous notes echoed off the body of the child, and their ethereal melody stole the attention of Faces. Their sounds harshly faded as the golden light finished returning to the staff, shrouding it in a soft golden glow. Faces could not sense any resonance around him.

Another’s presence was felt.

I have failed...
“It’s not your fault...”
She’s crazy!

Faces feared for the safety of the child and Blue, and he looked to them with an empty stare as 9 new voices came to reap their own. They haunted the child, but only Faces could hear them. The sky yielded to absolute night as nearly every source of light was eclipsed by a growing darkness. A presence appeared next to Faces as a small black cloud, and began to take shape.

I cannot protect you...

It was a beacon that his time was ripe.

He would be destroyed by his creator.

36. The Last Face

I am sorry...
“Sorry...?
Sorry for what...?”

The old essence of Faces was seized. A true authority commanded them, and those once under the former control of Faces used their powers against their creator. Fortunate ones with faces circled their prey from above, while those without simply stood, ready to receive orders and obey. If they were lacking, then more was taken, and even the Faceless now had a face. This transformation badly disfigured them. Reassembly of their face was incomplete, and fragmented shards of their new minds hovered around them, helping their new face to take shape. Their mouths opened

as they slowly began to circle around Faces, and their shrill screams took from him as their calling of Chaos summoned their master.

“Enough of this!
Set them free as you did for me!”

Flooded with anomalous data, Blue’s sensors were quickly overloaded. Distortions appeared all around them as the fabric of their local reality collapsed. They could not move. They could not escape. Such hostile actions only wanted to destroy, and this destructive intent focused on its first target.

“FACES!”
“STOP THEM!”

[He can’t...]

They are no longer mine to control...

Blue and Faces sounded hopeless, but that did not mean the child had to believe in their predictions. Their ignorance was a strong defense, and it helped fuel their actions. Microbursts of blue light surged down the child, and freed them from the suppressive force. Black clouds of ash formed around each floating face as their hungry mouths fed on their former master, and the body of Faces began to wither away. From him, they drew in their dark breath into a gathering storm. A new purpose was given to those that still wore a mask. Their faces were ripped as they too became one of the Faceless, and they lifelessly fell to the ground. In their loss, they took from the others, and left them without, but their consumption could not fill their emptiness.

[These power spikes are reckless!
Look! Unstable pairings!
They threaten all of us!
Can you calm them?!]

Probability of success was remote, but together, there was still a slim chance. Blue shared her plans with Mr. Planck as her blue bursts freed Kodo. Together, they retreated deeper into the crater to check on the Faceless. Peaceful comfort radiated from the child and Kodo as they placed their hands on one of the Faceless, but they only instinctually reacted to their touch, and twitched their body towards the child. Lost in their fractured mind, they were unaware of their new reality. Their empty stare gazed through the child, while their pulpy face of sparking and exposed circuitry slowly dripped with the remains of their corrupted blood. The child could not reach them, and Blue could not repair them while a new, growing threat lingered. Unaware of their surroundings and new reality, the newest of the Faceless wept empty tears. Blue distanced them from their sniffling murmurs as she turned them back towards Faces.

[“He did this!”
No...
“Destroy Faces and end this!”
Faces has changed!
“These are his monsters!”
There is another presence here that claims them...
It wants... what the old Faces wanted...]

Plump and full faces fell around them, and shook the earth as they landed. Too heavy to move, the disfigured Faceless stood still as they consumed the body of Faces from within the pit. Refusing to fall, 9 fractured masks of the Faceless orbited Faces from above, and their feasting formed a vortex of his remains. Their palate was unique, and they ate little. These new faces were still young in their growing power, but they had an easy target, and wanted to test their limits. A surge of data with new dangers...

“Look out!”

Chanting echoes of the Faceless launched a preemptive attack at Kodo. He was one of their own, but now an imperfect outcast. Black fire attacked his armor, and suppressed his movement as it battled Mr. Planck. A lifelessness formed within the eyes of Kodo, and the child looked into them for answers. Reflections boiled into a single flame, that escaped down a long and dark hallway within his pupils, until it was only a single, distant point of light. With an increasing amount of her light eclipsed, Blue struggled to understand, and could not explain his transformation. Concerns of inaction slowly turned to fear.

Forget about me...

You know that’s impossible!

The voice of the last Face was distorted. Blue light battled black flames as Blue tried to reach Kodo, but she was repelled with every

advance. Sparks erupted from the armor of Kodo as the black fire pummeled Mr. Planck, and their flames only grew in size as they were reinforced from the faces of the Faceless. They bellowed the deepest, audible notes as their hungry mouths grew, feeding on the body of Faces. With their own, unique desire for conquest, the Faceless each fed with a greater intensity than the next.

Crystals fractured and burst from the chest of Faces. They shattered into dust, and created a colorful stream of energy that was happily consumed by the new faces. Fragmented information was ripped from Faces, and consumed for a growing purpose. Even the old, stone faces were desired. They were plucked from the earth, and tossed into the air as a special treat. Each one briefly flickered as it reverted to earlier forms, then slowly faded to sand as its essence was consumed in a slow feast. One by one, their nearly empty husks then fell to the ground. The last bite was saved for another, but before the last of their energy was extinguished, each face would suddenly disappear.

[Faces and Kodo will not survive much more of this!

We need to get them away from this place!

The mountain?!

The planet!]

From the safety of her golden mask, the Witch gleefully looked on, but she did not notice its dwindling protection. Light from the glowing staff flickered as more of its radiance was eclipsed, and as its protective powers

diminished, her golden mask was exposed to the observations of the Faceless. Their corruption chiseled away at her face as the golden light was repulsed, and as the color of her own mask faded under the growing darkness, she longed for another to add to her collection.

Faces no longer frightened her, for something about his intent was different, and his presence was weakened. Information gathered from her new face shared his secrets as his body was ripped apart, and this hidden wisdom called out to her. Unable to understand all of their code, her envy compelled her forward as his body of gems lost its luster, and was altered for another purpose.

With Faces under siege, she believed in an easy victory. How much of his power could ultimately be hers, she did not know, but his end would soon be near, so she must act quickly. Once in control, she would no longer need to hide behind the gifts of others, and instead, could create her own reality. She could be herself, and express her will freely through her new powers. Tempted away from the safety of the golden light, she slowly moved towards Faces. Another face fell and vanished, and now there was only one stone face left...

[I see a way!
I think I can hold you both!
When there is only the real Face left...
When they are done eating...
Almost...!]

Little by little, the body of Faces faded

as the Faceless feasted. Exposed and unstable, the inner core of Faces ejected colorful bursts of energy out around them. The last of the old faces started to fall, and the Witch dove to catch it. She embraced it with all of her mind, and her commanding words were heard, but the new face did not move in response as it took control. Her greed hastily yielded to this invitation of power.

Her own thoughts betrayed her.

[
Will you ignore their suffering...?
Will you overfeed their desires...?
Will your fear control them...?
Will your wrath destroy them...?
Will you remain clean from their rotting thoughts...?
Will your grief of being alone consume you...?
Will your judgments give them freedom...?
You will experience your gifts!
Discard their weak and simple minds and become one!
]

Shadows of Chaos wrapped along her mind, and took control of her thoughts. She could not sense the new being, only that its presence brought her an overwhelming terror. Forced to know, her mind was overloaded beyond her simple understandings. She heard all of them, and fell into the background of her echoing screams. The eclipsed mask in her hands took on the mold of her old, aged face, but out of fear she threw the mask into one of the Faceless next to her. With her new

knowledge, she used her enhanced powers to destroy them both. The explosion knocked her past the child and Kodo, and embedded her into the earthen wall of the pit. Black flames over Kodo extinguished, and Blue shrouded him as she moved them closer to Faces.

[WOAH!
Are you ok?!
"I think so, but I could hear the Witch's thoughts...
We have to remove her mask before she becomes too powerful!"
That could kill her!
"She threatens us all!
The Witch is the enemy, don't you see?!"
Faces is the priority!
If he falls, the whole planet is at risk!]

Blue could not freely see into the mind of the Witch without making the child and Kodo vulnerable, but she began to suspect that the golden code was fighting its own battles. Under her shroud, Blue kept the child close to Kodo as they looked for an opening to rescue Faces. Staring at the child with a surprised hate, the Witch struggled to unearth herself. Her face was badly damaged. Half of her mask slowly cracked, and shattered into glass that fell with her tears.

My power is now weakness...

Weakened in the presence of his master, Faces was paralyzed from movement. A tear in their physical world opened from within the black cloud in front of Faces, and they could nearly see through the new being. It appeared

as slices of its higher self, for their plane of existence could not represent all of its features. Before them was only a partial existence, and with this new arrival, the atmosphere was stripped from the planet. Life without a mask gasped their last breath.

Faces shared his knowledge of the future with Blue, and even Mr. Planck. There was nothing they could do, for an invasion was imminent. No amount of their combined strength could defend against the incoming onslaught. Data flooded into Blue's systems. The old code was powerful, but this evolved code of his master did not share in their weakness. This powerful entity was perhaps, even greater than Violet.

[The Others...
There are more?!
"It is close to the end..."
"Enough talking!
Let us attack, now!
Before it is too late!"
No...
We have to retreat!]

Kodo could not comprehend the gravity of the situation. Their minds returned to their own as Blue hurriedly packed their things. His mission was incomplete, but Faces did not doubt the prophecy of his creator. It must be fulfilled, and if the creator himself must do it, then so be it. Where Faces failed, his master would begin, and Faces and everything he ever made would be consumed for an even greater power. Little by little, Faces retracted his external sensors and spies, and concentrated himself into the last Face. His

ambassador to Blue was the last to leave, but she chased after him before he made his departure.

[When the future is known, there is no hope...
You should know by now that I don't always agree with you! ***>:D***
These flaws will harm you...
We can help you heal, but not here!
There is no escape...]

All connections to Faces were forcibly severed, and his presence was barely noticeable, as if less than a grain of sand. Incoming data to Blue arrived scrambled, incomplete, and nonsensical. Space distorted and warped before them, as if one of their portals was cut, and violently thrown open. This disturbance unleashed phantoms of Faces that quickly circled him, but they turned away to taunt the Faceless.

The true form of his master showed itself to Faces and presented its demands. An unconditional siege lay waste to him as the Shadows of Chaos sliced in and out of the local realities near the last Face. Only the ripest of the Faceless were plucked, and they disappeared into a higher dimension. From this plane that none could observe, they began to consume the last Face. The last Face called out to his master, but his true name was scrambled and undefined. Faces was disintegrating around them. Blue did not give up so easily.

[Care to explain what that is so I get us out of here?!
It was not invented...

...merely discovered...
...always there...
...lingering near us...
That doesn't tell me much!
Flee while you still can...
These people are innocent!
Not their minds...
What did you do to them?!
Damaged before me...
I am only a machine...
This place is no longer safe...]

Blue was forced out of his mind as it was invaded, and she immediately repulsed those that suppressed Faces. He fell to the ground, and the Faceless pounced onto him. Blue moved the child behind Kodo as Mr. Planck set up a barrier against an incoming attack of whipping shadows. Mostly invisible, the defensive lattice only appeared when it was struck, but each whip slowly chipped away at the strength of Mr. Planck. Blue reinforced him, but any repairs were too slow to be performed while in combat, and so all of his available energy was directed towards their protection.

Kodo knew he was powerless against these magics, but that did not stop his perseverance. With limited options, he frustratingly looked for any way to provide aid. Mr. Planck sparked with damage from a heavy hit, and a reflection in the staff caught Kodo's attention. He was certain he could still be of use, and his warrior's spirit inspired him.

Reluctant to stay and harm those around him, Faces looked for an escape, but the void called out to the last Face. His remaining time would be brief, and the Shadows of Chaos

shrouded the remains of the last Face in a pulsing gas of their purest form. Trapped in a cosmic web, Faces was now the prey. His master would succeed where Faces failed, and claim all forms of his lesser self.

The Witch looked on from within the shelter of a crevice as her former master became a servant. With a growing delight, she watched as the blue light struggled to defend against a new force. She knew there was another here, stronger than any of them, and she longed to befriend them, if only to steal their energy. As her thoughts lingered on exploiting this new power, her hands pulled herself along the rock walls, closer to Faces. Her greed compelled her.

[Who... is your master...?]

Reflections of Faces briefly danced within the fallen shards of the Witch, but the Shadows of Chaos consumed them. Hunger of the Faceless would never fade, and Faces could sense his imminent demise. His essence was converting to another purpose. Each stage of the process was destructive, but in each final transition, Faces caught a glimpse of their shared future. After his destruction, the child was next. The last Face refused to let their power be used by another in this way.

His remaining power could be repurposed for his own destruction, but before Faces could tap into this energy, Blue charged herself within the remaining crystals of his body. Surging through these gems, Blue knocked the Faceless off of him with one giant pulse. This charged burst initially shocked the

Faceless, and they impulsively grabbed ahold of the shroud over the last Face, but it did not help them. Each of the nearby Faceless tore at the threads of a shadow as they were ejected into the air.

Another focused beam, and Blue filled the pit with her light, and momentarily freed Faces. It was enough for him to stand, but he did not share in their optimism. Many of the Faceless were cast off into deep orbits around the planet, but the shadows slowly descended into the blue light. They had their next target.

Retreat before it is too late...
“We’re not leaving without you!”

Shadows of Chaos accelerated their descent, and sliced through the blue light. Despite their near absence of mass, each strand struck Faces with such force that it fused with the contacted particle. As the other end of the strand fell, it created a partial gate for only itself, and anchored to a massive object on the other side. Blue, nor Faces could see beyond these portals that only seemed to expedite his destruction. As he was ripped apart, his essence pulsed through this dark web, and disappeared into the unknown.

Despite their collective defenses, seeing Faces weakened from the attack left the child afraid. Deep down, this sight scared them, but it did not require an explanation from Blue. Instead, she let the child experience their innate courage, fueled by a sheer ignorance of the situation. Fear was still present, and gripped them from within, but that did not stop their determination.

It wasn't over yet, however the probability of a successful retreat diminished with every passing moment. A blue particle fell near Kodo as Blue began to open an escape back home, but the nearby Faceless instantly turned to feed upon the anomaly. Even her small exits took too long to create before they were noticed and attacked, and Blue doubted her ability to move their allies to safety.

[We have to get Faces!
The living take priority!
He counts!
I must protect you!
Then protect me!]

"I'm going to get him..."

The child took a step forward. Nervously, they peered around the armored protections of Blue and Mr. Planck. Edges of the last Face turned to ash within the black fire, and fell over what was left of his body. Hasty eaters rushed to consume him, and from the energy of their first bite, they set their eyes on the next target. With lowered eyebrows and a focused look, the child met the gaze of the Faceless. The child was anxious, but a resolute purpose propelled them forward to meet this unknown foe.

One overt step was enough of a threat, and the Faceless lunged at the child, knocking them back from the vicinity of Faces. They did not stray far, and Blue easily absorbed and parried their blows. Kodo joined the fight, and Mr. Planck moved with him as his shield. Together, they jumped into battle, but Kodo's first target was the staff. Easily picking it up,

he knocked away several of the Faceless with one large swing. Caught by strands of shadows from a nearly hidden web, the Faceless froze in the air before them.

Another swing, and the child followed closely behind Kodo. This time, the shadows turned against the blue light, and the staff became entangled. Kodo let go in order to dodge as the Faceless lunged at them, and Mr. Planck hopped them back. The Faceless did not advance, and only guarded their feast. This could be their escape, but they could not get Faces.

[“Why must we save him?!”
I won’t abandon a friend!
“A friend?!
Is Faces that important?”
It is not just this planet that is in danger!]

Kodo feared for not only his people, but for his home. He did not want to see his newly freed planet destroyed, and so if the child and Blue trusted Faces, then he was ready to rescue an old enemy. One last pulse, and Blue gathered her last large survey of data. Peeking far enough into the future, she knew Kodo was a low priority for the Faceless. From this shared data, he and Mr. Planck had an idea.

Darting forward, the child jumped with Kodo towards Faces. Blue bolted them down, and they landed at the feet of the Faceless. Mr. Planck left Kodo, and appeared on the child’s feet, rooting them deep into the planet. Their impact quaked the earth, knocking Kodo back to the wall of the pit, and he lost control of the staff. Dangling shadows of the web heavily gored the pit in an effort to lessen

their stability, and then slowly descended with the heavy dust.

The Witch and the staff fell, but the Faceless were knocked away, high into the air. Hoping to reclaim the staff before the Witch, Kodo climbed down the walls of the pit, but he did not know how deep it truly was. Emerald shards from the body of Faces were also launched out of the pit, and their reflective remains littered the planet as they descended. The Faceless above scattered, for they were eager to feast on more of his body. Even the sparkling dust in the air was desired, and others hopped around as they gobbled the floating balls of glistening dust.

Only a skeletal form of the body of Faces remained, but he was still trapped by the many shadows that refused to let him go. With Mr. Planck assuming much of the defensive protections, Blue cut through strands of the dark webs with blades of her light as the child rushed over to free Faces. The Shadows of Chaos abandoned their portals, and collapsed on the child. Driving forward with the powerful steps of Mr. Planck, Blue easily pierced through, and the child reached out to grab ahold of the last Face. It briefly smiled as the light of the mask began to fade, but the child made contact before it was too late. The Shadows of Chaos surged from below, and tried to pry off the child's grip, but with the help of Mr. Planck, the child held the last Face with the weight of the planet.

[“Let go... before they take you...”
No...
No!
We're going to get you out of here!]

Tendrils of the shadows pierced through the body of Faces, and destroyed him from within. Repurposed black flames burst out and attacked, cracking the airs as they sizzled and surrounded the child. A maelstrom of blue light erupted out around them, repulsing and driving back any incoming advance. The Shadows of Chaos resisted, but the root of Mr. Planck was deep, and it cratered them deeper into the planet. The massive weight of the battle pulled everyone closer, and the Faceless began their rapid return to their master. Fractalized crystals briefly formed over the child in response to each attack that Blue defended, and her light attempted to protect them from the rapid changes to their existence.

Too delicate to sustain any more damage, the remaining body of Faces shattered as the child held the remains of the last Face. Shards ejected out a short distance, before they were drawn back towards the Faceless. Their heavy pull refused his escape, but some of these shards landed safely near the child. Blue held them as they moved within her whipping flames, and responded with her to every strike. Her blue glow radiated softly within the emerald crystals, but the added mass, however small, slowed her down.

[Help me save him!
I'm trying!!!
"Leave me..."]

Lingering dust did not stay airborne for long, and through the settling debris emerged

the Witch. Drawn towards the staff, she stared at the emerald crystals that orbited within its golden glow. Much of the body of Faces was drawn to this object, and through her new face, the Witch understood another source of power. Her face was perfect, but the form of her body was still of this planet. It too should be reforged, and she stared deeply into the tiny green shards as she imagined new designs for a perfect vessel of her mind.

Almost to the bottom of the pit, Kodo saw her nearing the staff. He jumped down in front of her before she could reach it. Grabbing the staff, he tried to evade her, but she hit him with a powerful blast. Without Mr. Planck, Kodo should have died, but the staff protected him, and absorbed much of the blow. Kodo was only knocked back, but now the staff was hers.

The Witch slowly moved her hands into the orbiting field of emerald shards, and felt their power cling to her body. With her new mask, she could command them, and they were all drawn to her from only a subtle thought. Piercing her skin, they altered her body, but she did not feel any pain. From within, she slowly began to change, but this power was not enough…

Elements of Faces surged through her, but it was not enough to lift the staff. The golden glow faded as the last emerald remains were consumed and absorbed. Despite her screams and primal roars, none of her intent would budge the staff. Her being was distorted, but her golden face did not alter the particles of Faces, and her mind struggled to experience this altered reality. However, there

was one who addressed her.

Controlled by the Shadows of Chaos, she was bound to another. Her golden mask protected her mind, but even so, she was afraid. As she held her face, she felt her power slipping. The child was weakening her master! Tempted by rewards of power, she was eager to prove her loyalty, and targeted the child for destruction as she slowly walked towards Faces.

"Masquerading as the creator is the ultimate farce!
Your power is limited...
I WILL USE IT!"

Without Mr. Planck to calm him, Kodo's mind and body were his own, and his warrior's spirit invigorated him. No matter how many trinkets and potions the Witch had, Kodo would never again fear her. Jumping back over to the staff, he easily picked it up off the ground. His eyes looked to Faces, and then to the staff. In his hands, the staff was stable, but it did not emit any of its warm, golden glow.

Crouching to ready his leap for a counterattack, Kodo wielded the staff over his head, but the Witch sensed this unexpected, rising danger, and slowly turned away from Faces to face him. He knew not what she was up to, but he did not trust her, and he tightened his grip as he studied her every movement. Even without the help of Mr. Planck, the presence of the staff in the hands of another was enough to alarm her. Kodo did not fear death, but he could not allow the Witch to ever rule again, for the horrors she

once created would now be unimaginable in her current form. The power she craved must be destroyed, and he set his eyes on the entity forming in front of Faces. Before he jumped, the Witch laughed, as if her countless thoughts amused her with images of his imminent demise.

“All this for a stranger?!”

“For a friend!”

If he was worthy to wield the staff, then she would take over his body! Charging through the air, the Witch suddenly appeared in front of him, and he instinctually lowered the staff to block. Her surging presence resonated with the staff, and was reflected back into her body. Almost as if his hands were guided, Kodo struck the body of the Witch. Knocking her back, the impact focused into the old particles of Faces. She resisted the hit, and haphazardly grasped at the reality around her, but this pull caused her body to pass through the voids around Faces. Her body was shredded, ripped apart, and swirled around them as her golden face fell into the dirt. Existing in places she should not, she did not know how to control her dismembered body. Large, gathering drops of her body lifted and fell around them as she struggled to reform.

This sudden distortion of space shook the last Face, and it nearly slipped from the child’s grip. A redirection of the smallest attention from Blue allowed the child to regrip the Face as it was being pulled apart. Faces was in his full form within the child’s mind,

but he was only a guest. He sat outside Blue's cottage, and looked at his reflection in her stream.

[“You have to let me go...”
I won't leave you to die!
“I am only an idea...
We are invincible...
You are mortal...”
Then come with us!
“You cannot stop the end...”
I will get you out of here!
“I cannot escape...
You are too weak...
Save yourself...
Your time is nearly out...”]

The will of the child was their own. Repairs and mentoring from Blue had given them a resolute mind, but lingering teachings from the Old Man had perhaps, made them stubborn. The Face began to crumble in the child's hands, and there was nothing they could do to stop it. Tiny arcs of light leapt away from this diminishing dust as the remains of the last Face bled into the colors around them. Part of Faces remained, but the Shadows of Chaos refused to let go. The last Face buckled under the stress of the invading shadows as they swarmed across the surface. With each deformation, Faces was changing, and the shadows neared the fingers of the child.

Latching on in one jolting bite, the Shadows of Chaos slowly slithered up the child's arms, in sharply angled, geometric patterns. Each movement appeared with a flash as each new collection of shapes crawled

up the arms of the child like a slow burst of lightning. The child cried out as the sting of the shadows grabbed them, and cut through Blue's defenses. Loosening her grip on the last Face, she recalled her light, and bolstered their defenses from within. Hearing their cry, Kodo attacked, and launched himself over the remains of the Witch. He slammed the staff down into the darkness bubbling up over the last Face, but it parted as effortlessly as a cloud of smoke.

His attack was merely a gift for the Shadows of Chaos as he arrived. Used as a vessel, the Witch appeared as slices of her former self that struggled to reassemble, and the Shadows of Chaos formed over her as a growing, synthetic mold. Blinded and confused, the Witch struggled to move under her new burdens, and she only desired to find her lost face. Her screams were of the stars, and a dark blue light illuminated her from within as she reformed. With the final arriving shadow of her master, the old code was eliminated.

Destroyed for his deviation, the energy of the staff was no more, and it vanished from existence. This was the power of the one before them. A cosmic tear of space was the only source Blue could see from the Shadows of Chaos, and his repulsing nature expelled Kodo and the Faceless from their presence. Ejected with a ball of blue fire, Kodo grabbed onto the edge of the pit before he was fully tossed out into space. Elements of the planet surged out of the pit, and he struggled to hang on as the debris flew past him.

With Kodo momentarily safe, Blue

turned her attention back to ridding the contamination on the child's arms. Holding the last Face was now a secondary objective as she fought against the jagged lines of black circuitry that continued to advance. Nearly taking control of their arms, it neared their elbows, and the last Face began to slip from the hands of the child.

[Save yourself!]

[We have to leave!
Don't let him go!!
We're being overwhelmed!
I...
I can barely hold on...
I have to let go, or this is the end for us both!]

To the child, Blue's voice was distorted, and the light of her world within faded behind a growing storm. Electric blue streaks cut across the skies as they became as dark as night, and her thunder repulsed the incoming attack. Faces vanished from Blue's sanctum, and she left the mind of the child. A nearly hidden light within the empty eyes of Faces faded as a distant blue bolt within them sparked and faded.

Shadows of Chaos blanketed the planet, and brought an end to any lingering light. Darkness disguised the shadows as one of their own. Only the crater the child stood in contained any light, and as the expansion of darkness approached its edge, the probability of escape neared zero. What would happen to them after Faces was destroyed, Blue did not know.

Darkness accelerated towards Kodo, and he looked back to the child, wondering if it was a safer fate to jump in, or risk meeting the approaching void. Before it could touch him, the mountain responded, and erupted with light. Huge balls of fire and streaks of light shot out into space. The mountain itself crumbled away as its matter returned to light, and escaped into the sky. There was now a clear voice from someone recently met but yet to be heard.

She spoke one word.

[Run!]

[RUN!

!]

The whisper barely made it to the aura of the child. They could not understand her words, but it was intercepted and translated by Blue. She relayed the message, but with the briefest hesitation, the child still refused to let go and witness the destruction of another. Feeling the last Face slip from their hands, they felt a surge of instability rush up their arms. With every movement, the child sensed the impending loss of Faces.

Without retreat, Faces saw their demise as a certainty. He sacrificed the remaining shards of his body, and freed the child from the grasp of shadows. The explosion flattened the edges of the crater out beyond the horizon, but the energy quickly dissipated, and was swallowed up in the surrounding darkness. Kodo was knocked off the ledge as it disappeared from the blast, and Blue caught

him as she and the child tumbled back. The Witch was unmoved, but she was still without a face...

Rejection of his body only briefly repelled his enemies, for now with the flattened earth and limited defenses, the Faceless could easily reach the last Face. After the blast wave subsided, they rushed back towards him under the cover of darkness. Ghostly shadows whisked by the child, but Blue could still detect a faint signal from Faces, and together, they chased after the Faceless before it was too late.

All that remained was the last Face.

The Faceless pounced, but the sky pulsed once with its restored light, and the crumbling of the mountain landed with a sudden impact. Appearing in a white mist, a pale phantom landed between the child and Faces before the Faceless could reach him. Her impact cracked the contaminated earth, ejecting matter out into space, and her light helped carry it towards her star. Snow and ice from the mountain rained down upon them, and cooled the lava that emerged from her impact. A fusion of elements surrounded them as new rivers and springs burst up from the earth around them, and reformed the land with the aggravated lava.

With the mountain gone, her star turned its attention to the Faceless, and shined down upon all of their lands. Stellar rays focused into concentrated beams that pierced through the darkness and freed them. As the tremors were tamed, the light shimmered within the

prisms of each raindrop as the Lady of the Mountain made her presence known. These rains removed other impurities from the lands, and helped heal the Faceless.

Their sun coalesced its light into her body as she stood over the last Face, and her presence forced the Shadows of Chaos and the Witch to retreat. Shadows collapsed into a ghostly form around the Witch while the voids spun around their forming body, wrapping it in darkness as they merged into a singularity. Their pull to Faces was stronger than the sun, and the Lady of the Mountain framed against the darkness as it lashed out to attack. It evaded her as it split into several smaller streams that then latched onto the last Face. Repulsing the body, her right hand reached out, and extended beyond the unknown abyss as she braced against the darkness. Her left palm was relaxed as it cupped a gathering ball of light at her center. The draw from the horizon of darkness grew as it gathered all matter near them.

It consumed her light.

There was enough left for an escape, and Blue opened a portal for a quick exit. Her light easily bounced through the prisms in the rain, and she spoke to all who would listen. The free were eager to follow her.

This planet is not safe!
We have to get out of here!

[Faces is still alive!]

They set their sights back on the last Face, but now the Lady of the Mountain was in danger as well. Kodo rallied his people into the portal as the child ran back towards Faces. Tendrils of corruption peeled off of Faces as he was set free, but he was too weak to move. The Lady of the Mountain stood by his side, expressionless, but with an unyielding resolve. She stared into the abyss as she peeled the last tentacle off of Faces, and converged her light around the tear in space as she forced it to close.

In the presence of the new light, the Witch emerged from the darkness. Her senses were heightened, and she raced over and fell upon her golden face. Parts of her synthetic hands reformed over the face as she seized it. Eclipsing its light, and altering its gifts, the Witch was now in control. Rising to her feet with her treasure in hand, it whispered to her under a new command as it restored her sight. Feeling her growing connection to it invigorated her, but then she experienced the pain of her master. As the last Face was set free from the Shadows of Chaos, she was weakened, and her judgment turned her attention to the one who threatened her.

“No... my power!”

The Witch looked up to the rains as she felt their seemingly acidic touch scar her beloved body. The beauty of her golden face was perfect, but under the persuasion of her new master, she felt inferior, and unworthy of its presence. In her hands, it was a powerful gift, and one that could save them. Not

wanting her power to wane, she appeared in front of the Shadows of Chaos, and attacked the Being of the Mountain with her golden face. This altered power overwhelmed her suppressive light, and darkness crawled around her in its harsh angles. She could no longer protect Faces. All movement, any sound, and any vibration of warmth was removed from their presence as the Shadows of Chaos appeared in front of the child in a single advance.

[Goodbye, my friend...]

“FACES!”

Spread too thin, Blue was too slow, and she could not reach Faces as the last Face fell. A bright energy from within slowly cracked the last Face. Seeing the Lady of the Mountain brought Faces peace, but he feared for her survival as she struggled against the new power of the Witch. He could protect them for just long enough for everyone to escape. Faces accepted his fate of destruction, and was consumed. The blast split the last Face, and it was ripped apart. His conversion to a bright, white light drove the Shadows of Chaos back into his portals, but he did not fully leave, and the shadows gripped the edges of their portals with such force that their tear of space grew.

Unmoved by the blast, the Witch defended the attacks from the last-ditch effort of the last Face. Seizing the opening, the Lady of the Mountain tried to remove the mask from the Witch, but she shielded herself in a dome of protection. They were simple deflections. White light split into wavelengths of different

colors that rushed out in front of the blast as the Lady of the Mountain attempted to protect Kodo and her people while they fled.

The blast was contained, but it was a worthy distraction. A partial piece of Faces ejected past the area of the blast, and landed near the child as they were knocked back. This shard of the broken Face pierced the crust of the planet as it came to rest. Finally at peace, but this piece would not enjoy solace, as it was in a foreign land with invaders fast approaching. Peeking out of the dirt, it slowly froze in place, and the now friendly Face was but a partial mask. Everything was briefly tinted blue, as there was only one, and the last sparks of oranges and yellows faded from the mask as its light was extinguished. The last ember of the dying light went out, and there was only smoke cloaked by darkness.

Commanded by another, the Witch refused to relent, and through her golden face, she feasted upon the face of the Guardian of the Mountain. The Shadows of Chaos unwrapped the Witch as her form merged with the unstable being. Gathering himself, the Shadows of Chaos unified their summoned portals into one, and consumed the tear in space. Drawing in all matter near them, the remains of Faces were easily consumed, and dissolved into nothingness.

The light of Faces had faded.

Darkness spread out, and began to consume all. Into the hungry void everything went, and the Shadows of Chaos targeted the last source of unbroken light. Feeling the

destructive gaze, Blue readied their escape, but the child still resisted. There were still others to help escape, but Blue could not defend the child against these foes with her portal open. Blue had no answers or insight into the future, but before the Shadows of Chaos could attack them, the Lady of the Mountain seized her last opportunity. She was unstable, and a rainbow of colors bled from her under the golden face, but these broken rays of light ensnared the Witch and the Shadows of Chaos, buying her people precious moments of more time to escape. Distorting reality, the individual bands of colors carried screams of her sisters, but Blue could not make out who they were.

"We're all safe!"
"Get out of there!"

Colors of light warped within the frozen half of the broken Face. It lay halfway between the child and the Guardian of the Mountain, unconsumed, and untouched. The child refused to let any more of Faces fall to the shadows. Blue did not yet flee, and the child too could sense anomalies lingering on the surface. Perceived data from the mask was curious. What existed within this half of the broken Face, they did not know, but the child ran towards it.

"What are you doing!?!?"

Sliding into the dirt, the child grabbed the last shard of the last Face, and Blue slingshot them back towards her portal.

Focused on his newest enemy, the Shadows of Chaos launched his piercing attacks through the air towards the child and Blue. As the last light from her face shined on the child, the Lady of the Mountain faded with the Witch behind the shadows, and Blue escaped the beckoning darkness.

Having been taught her secrets, and trained in her ways, a red particle darted off the Lady of the Mountain as the last of her light faded. Red escaped into the crashing wave before it collapsed, and was the last to leave. Travel of this nature was forbidden, and closely watched since Faces had once closed their many exits. However, Violet had helped the escape, but through this overt outburst of data, the Shadows of Chaos identified his enemies. Those not under his control were unpredictable, however, now they were all before him.

They could not hide forever.

The Shadows of Chaos existed well beyond the simple reality of the child. Finding the destination of their escape was an easy task, and now Blue could sense the collapsing darkness behind them. Red was faster, and aided them in a quick retreat. With Violet and Blue exchanging information as background noise, the child simply observed. During these pondering thoughts, the child wandered through their mind.

“I have an idea!”

Red light illuminated the room of the

child as it slowly assembled for the night. A long day had come to an end, but for one, it was perhaps, only the beginning. In each hand, the child held one half of a face, one from the beach, and one from the last Face. Red and Blue light surrounded the child as they brought their hands closer together.

See you soon, my friend…